

ゲート

自衛隊
彼の地にて、
斯く戦えり

3. 動乱編

Illustration: 黒獅子
柳内たくみ
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Chapter 1

By the time the Flame Dragon's head was placed upon the gates to the Imperial Capital, it had been several months since the earthquake, and in the meantime, the fear in everyone's hearts had slowly faded away. The Flame Dragon was a force which could not be resisted by humanity, and people the world over considered it a natural disaster, much like an earthquake. Therefore, all people could do in the wake of the tragedy which the Flame Dragon brought was sigh and mutter, "Such misfortune". They felt it was sent by the gods to torment humanity, much like floods and hail. This attitude of helpless acceptance was deeply rooted in people's hearts. Of course, people had tried to protect themselves against such disasters. Much like how measures could be taken to protect against floods, many heroes who had tried to slay the Flame Dragon had appeared. The key word was "tried". Until now, nobody had succeeded. Those heroes might have been weak, but they did not lack for either courage or motivation. The only thing they had done wrong was that they had lost. It would not be an exaggeration to say they could never have won. And because of that— There were two main opinions when it came to the rumors of the Men in Green chasing off the Flame Dragon. Some were filled with hopeful expectation while others were dubious, and a brewing tension filled the air between both camps. These rumors were spreading in the countries allied to the Empire, let alone within the Empire itself. And so, today, the symbol of terror and despair — the Flame Dragon's head — now adorned the Imperial Capital's main gate, for everyone on

the streets to behold. Just being able to drive off a Flame Dragon was impressive enough. Now that the proof of the Flame Dragon's death was before their eyes, it had a powerful impact on everyone who saw it. Their reaction could be described as "awestruck" or even "dumbfounded", though a more objective description might be that "they stared with eyes wide and mouths open". Usually, when an enemy army was defeated, a castle was conquered, or when a hated foe was slain, the people's hearts would be filled with a fierce joy, and they would cry out in excitement. However, the being called the Flame Dragon was so powerful that it seemed unrealistic that someone could actually kill it. Now that they saw the Flame Dragon's head, separated from its corpse, all they felt about this was confusion. In any case, the lack of excited action or cheering could be due to the shock which filled everyone. That said, it did not mean they were unmoved. Their reaction could be described as a "dormant heat". For instance, a wildfire burned hot and strong, but if left alone, it would quickly burn itself out. In contrast, the people's feelings were like how boiling magma would flow everywhere without being exposed to the light of day. If someone cast a flammable object into it, a great fire would blaze up in an instant. High city walls surrounded the Imperial Capital. The southern face of the walls was where the Imperial Capital's main gate was located, in the form of a pair of well-fitted double doors. The south gate was jammed up by those people who had come to see what the fuss was about. Every single location in sight was filled with people, be it the streets or the windows of nearby

buildings, and some people had even climbed onto the roofs in order to see the Flame Dragon's head. Everywhere, one could see people moving back and forth, to the point where they were rubbing shoulders against each other and treading on their neighbors' feet as they moved. Fortunately, there was no large scale disturbance or panic. As they looked at the Dragon head, they froze and watched with their mouths wide open, hardly daring to blink as they let this incredible fact wash over them. Shortly after that, the people began whispering to each other. "Who could have done something amazing like this?" "Was there a poster or did anyone say anything?" After all, there was no mass media which could swiftly inform people of facts. When people wished to show or declare something before the masses, they had to put up a plaque or a poster with their desired message. Otherwise, people would not know what had happened or who had done it. For instance, some charlatan might jump out and declare "I did this!" as the people were busy discussing the matter. However, there had been no announcements or a bill posted. All the audience could do was look at the Flame Dragon's vast head. Who had done this, and what sort of massive battle had that person fought to obtain an achievement like this? Nobody answered the crowd's doubts and questions. This magnificent trophy before them was a silent witness to the monumental victory that had been won. That silence was more convincing than any amount of words. Humans were a race that came up with their own theories, explanations and conclusions, and then sought people to agree with their findings. That being the case, the

speculation started at once. Some people said, "I think only the Men in Green could do this. What do you think?" By the time the Emperor announced the slaying of the Flame Dragon, that news had already been making the rounds on the streets. Slightly earlier, the Emperor considered that this might be a matter of national security. In order to make a judgement call on this issue as quickly as possible, this news raced up the reporting chain to the Emperor. However, that method resulted in the widespread circulation of rumors. Almost everyone who heard the news wondered if their ears were working. After that, various ruling nobles sent envoys or even went in person before the Emperor to verify the truth with him. The Dragon's head had appeared on the south gate in the morning, and by the time the highest authority in the Empire, Emperor Molt Sol Augustus released an official statement, it was evening. Emperor Molt simply said, "Is that so" after hearing the report from Count Marx, the head minister of his Cabinet. After that, he gave an order -- dispatch troops to disperse the crowds, and have the head on the city gates brought into the Imperial Palace. "Your, your Majesty, did you know about this beforehand?" Count Marx was surprised by the Emperor's calm reaction to this news, hence his question. "It seems the canaries in the palace are starting to get uneasy. In the face of that, I have gathered my resolve. I will not be perturbed no matter the situation." The defeat of the Imperial Legions, the sudden earthquake, the collapse of the Senate Building, all these frightening events had occurred recently, one after the other. Perhaps it was because of these events and

the promise of future ones like it that the Emperor said he had “gathered his resolve”. Still, his attitude toward bad news was quite surprising. Therefore, Count Marx was deeply disturbed as he stood before the Emperor. “I see...” “Mm. The news of the Flame Dragon’s demise has flustered some people. But this is not in itself a bad thing. Being able to eliminate a disastrous entity like that is a cause for celebration.” “But it seems the situation is not as simple as you say...” “I understand. The slaying of the Flame Dragon is a feat that has never been accomplished before and may never be done again. It is a feat comparable to a single soldier defeating an army or taking a castle. Should that Dragon’s slayer report his name, they will receive ample praise and compensation regardless of their origin or species. But that person has not yet come forward, which I cannot understand. It would make sense if that person was humble, but then why would a humble person put the creature’s head on display? It is a contradiction I cannot resolve.” “Indeed. That person’s motives are unknown. Still, there should be some way for us to understand his actions...” “But perhaps I am thinking too hard, and trying to see something where there is nothing. If this person intended merely to inform the people of the Flame Dragon’s death... Count Marx, I hereby charge you with investigating who was the person who hung the Dragon’s head on the gate. If we can find out who did it, even if that person’s intentions are hard to grasp, we should still be able to gain a clue regarding them...” Count Marx bowed with an “Understood” before leaving, with the intention of investigating as swiftly as possible. However,

the Emperor called out to him before he could leave, and he turned back to the Emperor once more. "May I serve you in some way?" "Call Piña to me." "Piña-dono, you mean? From what I know, she is currently entertaining the ambassadors from Nihon... shall I summon her immediately?" While a summons from the most exalted ruler of the Empire should be obeyed immediately, the person being summoned was carrying out an important duty of the state. So, should she be summoned, or not? Count Marx was waiting for that answer. And then the Emperor changed his mind, and waved his hand as he continued speaking. "Oh, that's right. Tonight we celebrate the return of our countrymen. I should have attended that event, but I forgot." "Your Majesty, may I know what matter requires Piña-dono? If the need is great, I could..." "Never mind. I will see her again at the celebration tonight. We can talk then." "If it pleases your Majesty, could you enlighten me with regards to your intentions?" "Mhm. In truth, I intended to ask her about a report concerning the Men in Green. The report stated that the Men in Green drove the Flame Dragon away from a village. I had thought it to be a joke at first, but things being as they are, I feel it is worthy of further investigation." "From the looks of things, could it be that these people exterminated the Flame Dragon...?" Count Marx looked profoundly disturbed as he said that. "Mhm. Who are these Men in Green? Which country do they hail from? We must investigate this matter thoroughly. Then, I shall entrust you with that task." Count Marx dipped his head in respect while replying, "Understood" in a suitably deferential tone. Then, he

muttered the words “Men in Green”, as though to carve them into his heart. *** At this moment, the luncheon to welcome the Japanese ambassadors was about to begin in the southern palace of the Imperial Capital. It was organized by Princess Piña Co Lada. In attendance would be various ministers, important Senators, military figures, patricians, as well as their accompanying spouses and daughters. According to the Empire’s practices, if a foreign ambassador was present, they would be formally welcomed regardless of whether their nations were at war with each other. Otherwise, the subsequent talks and negotiations would not be officially recognized. Since this was the most important part of the process, the Emperor would speak words of welcome to the visiting ambassadors, which was in effect a formal guarantee of protection and free movement for the foreign ambassadors during their time in the Empire. After that, the foreign contingent could begin mingling with the Imperial diplomats. And then, the Japanese had chosen to politely refuse this invitation. The reason was because both sides had already done battle with each other, and the spectre of the Ginza Incident loomed behind both sides. In addition, the hostage return was not yet completed, and the Japanese government felt that treating each other as friends at the current moment would not be appropriate. Therefore, Princess Piña came up with a solution that satisfied both sides — she organized a luncheon in her own name. After the luncheon, the guests from both sides would move to the adjacent hall, where a celebration would be held to welcome back the released

prisoners. In this way, the Japanese would have a reason to be there, for the return of the prisoners. After that, the Emperor would show up in person to meet the Japanese guests. It might have sounded surprising that the willingness of people to attend an event could change depending on what it was called. That kind of thinking could be considered laughable and pointless, from a certain perspective. It was because of this pointlessness that adults needed excuses like “showing off” and “presence” in order to show up to these occasions. However the fact that people could think of these occasions as laughable and pointless was a sign of prosperity. Only a developed and mature society had the luxury of thinking of events in that way. Even without reams of rules and regulations, people could respect each other's' boundaries and live while understanding each other. After all, in an undeveloped society, people would scoff at these values, perhaps even ignore them entirely, and life in that society would be chaos. For example, it would be like a student at school being bullied and looked down on by their peers. One could imagine the final result of that. Phenomena like these existed in the international community. In order to live in peace, one needed something to be proud of and which others could respect. Therefore, even the pointless things described above would prevent the seeds of future conflict from being sown. That was diplomacy. Unlike interpersonal relationships, there was no room for error in international diplomacy. This extended to the peace talks as well. Although the objectives of both sides was to reconcile differences in opinion and clear up

contradictions, since the talks would involve the reputations, traditions and customs of both sides, among other things, it made the process of these talks very complicated and troublesome. However, a diplomat's job was dealing with these problems and achieving a common understanding with people who were troublesome, but who had something worth trading for. In order to ensure both sides could come to a common understanding, even those pointless things as mentioned above might become part of a scheme. With that in mind, the composition of the diplomatic party from Japan became obvious. For example, there had to be around 20 politicians among the personnel going to the Imperial Capital, as well as several colonel-grade military officers, as well as a certain councilwoman called Shirayuri Reiko, who was Japan's representative. Her job title had been changed from "Prime Minister's Aide" to "Vice-Minister for Special Region Problem Countermeasures". This was done in order to address the arrogance of the Empire. Said arrogance was best expressed as "Since no other nation is our equal, a Senator from the Empire is automatically superior to a Senator from any other country." The fact that she was present was a form of countermeasure employed against the Imperial diplomats, who were used to being arrogant and patronizing to their foreign counterparts. The Empire did not have female ministers. When a female emissary came to the Empire, the assumption was that she must be some form of royalty. According to courtly etiquette, someone like her would be below the Emperor and the Imperial Household, but she would

be above senior politicians and officials. This time, the Japanese delegation had chosen personnel in defiance of the Empire's usual practices. In response, the Empire decided to lower the quality of their reception — in terms of etiquette, dress, and so on — of the Japanese by one grade below the highest possible level. In other words, the Japanese contingent's welcome would be slightly poorer than the Empire's highest standard, in order to preserve a sort of equality. The preparations for all of these could be attributed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs official Sugawara Kouji. Currently, he was introducing the key figures to Vice-Minister Shirayuri, as though he was showing off the fruits of his diplomatic labors. "This is Lord Cicero, a member of the Senate." "Well met, Vice-Minister-dono. I had not expected the representative of Nihon to be a female. May I ask if there are many female ministers in your land?" "No, there are not many. Even in my country, the politicians are usually male." "Thus, being able to hold your position must imply formidable ability on your part." "You flatter me. In truth, I was somewhat worried about taking this position." Her words made Cicero think of their earlier defeat, and he smiled bitterly. "It seems we have been completely deceived. I was thinking the same thing when I met with Sugawara-dono, but it seems that the people of your nation are overly humble. Please be merciful to us on the negotiation table." After they had exchanged the minimum basic pleasantries, Cicero beat a hasty retreat. With that, the Imperial diplomatic offensive was concluded. In accordance with Japanese protocols, Vice-Minister Shirayuri

Reiko wore an evening dress which was not fancy but yet not plain. In accordance with Imperial traditions, she lounged on a large couch. "It's strange, this place." she said to Sugawara in a tone that might have been taken as a complaint. Sugawara explained, "We have no choice but to use the enemy's capital as the place for negotiations. Do consider the speed of their communications. Normally, we would have begun talks in a neutral country, but given that the Empire uses horse couriers to pass messages, just about any disturbance could be used by them to send out a messenger to buy time..." Shirayuri replied, "That's not what I mean." though those last words seemed somewhat ambiguous. Then she looked at the patrician ladies nearby. The way they dressed like Japanese people was quite surprising. As an example, the upper crust of European society had been influenced by movies and television shows recently. Once a culture reached its peak and flourished, all sorts of strange and wondrous trends might emerge. For instance, people might wear big hats that made others ask "Isn't it heavy?", tied with ribbons that made people want to ask "What are those for?" as well as hairdos that were several times bigger than one's head. And then there were designs which were unnaturally revealing, which showed off the curves of the body, and there were even outfits which resembled tropical birds... Vice Minister Shirayuri's son frequently watched anime, and these people looked just like the characters in those shows. "I heard that the formal wear of males in the Empire was roman togas, so I assumed that their women's clothing would also be in the Roman or Grecian

style... In truth, only their host, Princess Piña, had met her expectations, which confused her even more. Normally, there should not have been such sudden changes in fashion. At the very most, there should only have been slight variations from the basic styles. But given the two strikingly different styles before her, she was quite curious as to what had caused this to come about. Fortunately for Sugawara, Shirayuri was only voicing her doubts, and not asking for a proper investigation. The changes in Imperial fashion were result of contact with other cultures, and in a way, Sugawara was somewhat responsible for this. That being said, explaining the true nature of “Cosplay” to the ladies of the Empire would be difficult even for someone like Sugawara. *** “Sugawara-sama? Can women become ministers in your country?” The welcome party organized by Piña had successfully concluded, and right after that, the next event was about to begin. In the Japanese context, it would be like an after party following a wedding. Unlike the previous welcoming party, the atmosphere of the next event was much more relaxed. People chatted and enjoyed fine food and drink, and the sounds of joy and laughter rang through the air. As expected, everyone had been wound up after the stiff lunch party for the ambassadors of the enemy. In contrast to that, the purpose of this second party was to celebrate the return of 15 patrician men, who had been thought dead. The gathered family members lost themselves in the revelry, and it was only natural that the atmosphere was one of jubilation. Because of that, the Japanese contingent seemed somewhat out of place. The delegates gathered in a

corner of the room, sampling the food laid out on the nearby tables and exchanging notes about the key figures in the Empire as they awaited the Emperor's arrival. Just then, a voice called out in greeting to Sugawara. Sugawara had been busy with translation duties and making introductions since the start of the previous party, and he was taking advantage of his spare time now to catch his breath. However, shortly after that, he was startled by that voice, and he was certain that the owner of that voice should not have been here. His head began to ache as he slowly turned back to look at the source of that voice. Standing by herself was the heiress of House Tuery, Sherry-san. This young lady had just celebrated her 12th birthday several days ago. She was cheerful and adventurous, and her big round eyes made her look adorable. This girl tilted her head and smiled mischievously at the obviously startled Sugawara. In the past, Sugawara had given Sherry a necklace of small pearls. That necklace now adorned her neck. In addition, she was wearing a dress which covered her whole body and made her look like a flower. The way she was trying to doll herself up and look like an adult was quite amusing. "Sherry-sama, not tonight." Sugawara turned away as he said this. As a member of the Japanese delegation, he was wearing a tuxedo. Just then, someone tugged on his sleeve. "Please don't be so cold. I know you're not interested in a young girl like me, Sugawara-sama. However, in four years' time I'll be a woman in my own right. Until then, I'm going to work hard to make myself into a woman who fits you, Sugawara-sama. So, please be kind to me. Treat it as a future investment. Then, next up...

why don't you introduce me to that lady minister of your country?" Sherry's eyes shone from her smiling face. She was confident that she would not be refused. Just then, Sugawara was started to feel dizzy. Even if she had boldly come over and spoken intimately to him. Sugawara could not treat this girl coldly, because she was a valuable connection to Marquis Casel. At first, he had thought his role to be that of a babysitter, but a misunderstanding had occurred somewhere and changed something in this girl's heart. Since Sugawara was not good at looking after children, he decided to learn from Professor Higgins in "My Fair Lady", giving her guidance on how to speak and act as well as teaching her Japanese. Perhaps that was what had caused the problem. That said, to Sugawara, girls of her age changed their minds at the drop of a hat. At first, he had thought Sherry's parents would not seriously consider this sort of thing, so he thought of maintaining a respectful distance to cool things between them, which might solve the problem. However the Tuery family had exceeded his expectations. When Sherry had made her feelings known, Marquis Casel, who was her caretaker, immediately named Sugawara as a candidate to be his future nephew, and began to take him seriously. The reason for that was simple — political considerations. At present, House Tuery did not have rich lands, nor did they count any capable officials or up-and-coming soldiers among their family. In order to improve their present circumstances, they would have to improve their ties to Nihon and make their presence felt in the diplomatic arena. The surprising thing was that this

idea was not the brainchild of the house's adults. It was Sherry who had listed the pros and cons of the plan on her own accord in order to convince her father to support her pure love. In addition, Sugawara was nearly 30 years old. As an elite diplomat, his future was worth watching. Ever since he had begun working at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, his objective had always been to reach the highest ranks of that ministry. However, the ridiculous notion of becoming a new son-in-law of House Tuery, and that his intended wife was going to be a 12 year-old daughter of a nation over a thousand years behind Japan, was not only unheard of, but would actively hold back his career. In addition, it could be considered a crime, and Sugawara had no interest in young girls. Therefore, he refused to have anything to do with this mess. From Sugawara's point of view, it would have been much better to discuss wedding plans with the heiress of a first-class enterprise. Of course, looks and family background were not the only criteria. Anyone whose family background could exert great influence in the diplomatic field would also be desirable. For instance, someone who had connections with the great economic powers of Western Europe, and so on. In any case, Sugawara had been using the excuse of work to avoid Sherry, but he had not expected to meet her here. House Tuery must have been quite something to bring a 12 year-old girl to this event. "No, the one I shouldn't be underestimating is this young lady..." Sugawara sighed as he felt a bout of dizziness come over him. At the same time, he felt like he was being bound by something. Sherry drew closer to him, and said in a voice like

throwing a tantrum, “I haven’t seen you much recently, I’ve been feeling really lonely...” “I’ve been busy recently. After all, my work is my priority. I hope you’ll understand.” “Wah, I’m so happy! I always thought you treated our meetings as work. But little did I know you started taking them as personal meetings. I’m so happy to hear that~” “No, no, that’s not what I mean...” Sugawara tried to keep Sherry from hugging him, but the girl before him would not be denied. “I’m so glad every time I see you. But this must be boring for you, is it not, Sugawara-sama?” As Sherry said this, she grabbed Sugawara’s hand and pressed it to her developing chest. Now that she had him in his grasp like that, there was no escape. “Or does this mean you’re already tired of me? Okaa-sama told me that no matter what kind of feelings I had for a man, I should not cross that final line. If not, he would treat me coldly. Sugawara-sama’s been so cold to me, that must be why, right?” “It’s not like that! Sherry-san, please don’t say things in public that will damage people’s reputations!” Sugawara lifted up his unpinned hand and frantically waved it to indicate “no”. “Ah, that’s wonderful. I can tell from your words that you know what that legendary final line is, Sugawara-sama. But what does that mean? Okaa-sama’s lectured me about it before, but it seems I missed the chance to ask her about it and now I don’t know anything about it. Could you tell me, please?” I’ll make sure to teach you properly! Sugawara shouted... in his heart, of course. “Is this proper? Things like that should not be mentioned in front of many ears. The truth is that rumors are like the wind. One cannot see the wind, and people tend to

make up things in their minds to fill in what they cannot see. Now, if crude people were to make up things in their own heads and spread them, it would lead to a terrible result. In the end, the lady in question will be worse off for it. Please understand that I am saying this because I am thinking about you.” “Yes. I know very well that you think about me, Sugawara-sama.” Sherry seemed to absorb that lesson politely and sincerely. And then she said, “Let us meet in private afterwards and talk, then. Promise me!” Suddenly, another wave of dizziness came over Sugawara. He grabbed his head and groaned, unable to reject Sherry’s invitation. “Now, for various reasons, I must now greet the Vice-Minister that my future husband serves. Sugawara-sama, please introduce me.” “What are these ‘various reasons’? I won’t agree if you can’t explain them to me.” Sugawara was still desperately trying to avoid the topic of becoming a son-in-law. “Don’t say that. After all, there’s no harm in introducing me, right?” “But how shall I begin?” “In any case, please look over there.” As Sherry said so, she indicated the Japanese delegation with Vice Minister Shirayuri. “As you can see, the people of the Empire are merely clustered together and watching the movements over here. Wouldn’t that make this chance to mingle meaningless? Therefore, I shall set an example, and then the others will follow,” she said. At the present moment, the gathered nobles surrounded the released prisoners. They had no plans of even speaking to the Japanese, let alone understanding them. An observer would come away the impression that neither side had any intention of speaking to each other. After all, as

nations at war, the people from both sides might well have lost people to the armies of the other. From the perspective of the Imperials, this was only natural. Sugawara and the others understood this too, so they also felt that there was no reason for either of them to try too hard to reach out to the other side. “Well, this isn’t a big problem. The delegates have already spoken with the important people of the Empire, haven’t we?” Piña’s welcome party had been organized for just that purpose. Afterward, all they would have to do was wait for the Emperor to show up, exchange pleasantries, and then the basic formalities of the peace talks would be complete. And then, Sherry wagged her index finger while going “ch, ch, ch”. “How naive you are, Sugawara-sama. To us, the people of the Empire, Nihon is an unknown quantity. Even a girl like me knows that your country has remarkable culture and frightening military power. However, how much do they know about the people of Nihon? I know full well that you are a kind man despite your cool exterior, Sugawara-sama. Of course, that is only limited to the special relationship I enjoy with you. I don’t know about the rest of your fellows. In addition, the leader of the Japanese delegates is female, and given the rumors I’ve heard, there’s reason to believe that the women of Nihon are incredibly vicious and powerful. I believe everyone is afraid to approach her under the effects of that misconception, fearing that anything they do might invite a brutal beating with fists or feet.” Sugawara recalled the brutal melee in front of the Emperor, and the servicewoman who had beaten the Crown Prince half to death with her bare hands. He had been there at

the time and remembered the incident vividly. “It seems that the events of the night of the earthquake spread like wildfire. The people of the Empire are still worried about how long that peace will last, even if it is achieved. Have you considered that?” Humans were creatures that sought to exorcise their fear by force of arms — “They are scary, so I must defeat them”. This impulse caused a chain reaction that might lead to the seeds of future conflict being sown, such as civil wars and the like. The government of Japan had extended an olive branch to the Empire to avoid that sort of thing. “Things being as they are, your efforts ought not be wasted. You need to work harder to achieve a common understanding with us.” this girl suggested. “That being the case, I, Sherry, shall set a good example. In this way, our countries will take a step toward mutual understanding, and this will be a great help to Sugawara-sama’s work here.” Sherry batted her eyelashes as she finished, as though to ask Sugawara, “How about that?” At this point, even Sugawara had to take her proposal seriously — her words were definitely worthy of consideration. “Is she really only 12 years old?” In Arnus, there was a girl who looked about as old as her, but who was actually over 900 years old. “Could it be Sherry-san is someone like that?” Sugawara thought for a moment. The words, “high and mighty” or “putting on airs” failed to do justice to this girl. Indeed, she was hard to understand. With these thoughts in mind, Sugawara could not help but ask, “Sherry-san, were you hit by a truck in a previous life and reincarnated with memories of your past life?” After listening to Sugawara, Sherry smiled adorably and

said, "I have no idea what you're talking about. You're saying strange things, Sugawara-sama." At this point, Sugawara realised that he had been unconsciously affected by Itami. The man's constant babbling of nonsense had left its mark on him, and he cursed his own lack of focus. That being said, this girl called Sherry was wise beyond her years. And in truth, her optimism and vision was difficult for Sugawara to deal with. However, at this point in time, he had to separate his personal feelings from his evaluation of her proposal. "All right, I get it, then let me introduce you. However, don't get it wrong; I may have accepted your proposal, but that doesn't mean I accept you." "Mm, I understand. I understand your true intentions, Sugawara-sama. Then, I'll leave the rest to you." In search of guidance, Sherry thrust her hand out at Sugawara like a patrician lady. "Does she really understand?" Sugawara had his doubts, but things being as they are, he had to take Sherry's hand, knowing well what others around him might think. "Your Excellency, my name is Sherry, a member of House Tuery, and I am pleased to meet you." Sherry said as she curtsied neatly before Shirayuri. Sugawara could not help but be impressed by her immaculate Japanese and her picture-perfect politeness. However... "I have received much of Sugawara-sama's affection. I hope to learn many more exciting things from him in future." As Sherry said this with a blush, Todo and all the other men of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs pierced Sugawara with their needle-sharp gazes. Their eyes seemed to be asking, "What have you done to this girl?" or "Sugawara, you're finished." They seemed to be revelling in

their rival's misery. Sherry's words had not only devalued Sugawara in the eyes of others, but they had even put him in one hell of a fix. "Thank you for your inquiry, my lovely young lady. Your Japanese is very good." "Your Excellency is most kind. After all, I have only studied phrases suitable for greetings." Sherry's humble attitude, along with the Japanese she had learned in just a few months, reflected on the various things Sugawara had taught her and what he had spoken to her. The emphasis on "exciting things" was unmistakable. Shirayuri bowed politely to Sherry after hearing that, and then fixed him with a judgemental look. "Sugawara-kun, I trust you have not been irresponsible?" "I have conducted myself with restraint." "That is good. In future, please avoid developments which might lead to unsightly consequences." "That goes without saying." The way Sherry had interacted with the Japanese contingent allowed the patricians to shed some of their tension. As Sherry had predicted, the patrician ladies began flocking to Sugawara, asking to be introduced. Then, as though drawn in by the spectacle, the Senators and other Imperial worthies joined them. This was how the talks between the Japanese diplomatic contingent and the Imperial patricians, which were also the first step in the peace process, began. At this moment, the atmosphere in the hall was one of peace and harmony. And then, as though aiming for this moment, one of the followers struck the ground with his staff, sending a sonorous sound ringing through the room. "Announcing the arrival of his Imperial Majesty Emperor Molt, his Imperial Highness Prince Zorzal and her Imperial Highness

Princess Piña!” *** This was the first public appearance of Zorzal El Caesar as Crown Prince. Given his personality, he might have been quite cynical about it. “Zorzal-sama. May I ask why you look so bothered?” In response to Tyuule’s question, Zorzal slowed down and replied in a rough and agitated tone. “Why do I have to meet with the Nihon delegates?!” “This is public activity, and your Highness is the Crown Prince, so...” “Dammit! What a pain in the ass!” “For-forgive me!” Tyuule has no choice but to jog behind Zorzal, given that her stride was shorter than his and she was wearing high heels which she was unaccustomed to. The corridor they travelled was dark and made of stone, so it was very slippery. Tyuule could not help but squeal as she almost tripped and fell several times. And now, Zorzal suddenly stood still and braced her with an arm that was as solid and stout as a log. “Don’t you know how to walk, idiot? Also, I was not scolding you.” “However, the mission from last time failed, and that was all my fault...” “The ones at fault were the useless operatives. You just relayed a message, where is the fault in that?” Ever since Zorzal had become Crown Prince, his attitude to Tyuule had slowly changed. Of late, he had kept Tyuule by his side, without the chains and collar, and even allowed her to wear respectable clothing. Incidentally, Tyuule’s clothes were modelled after the latest patrician fashions. Not only was there barely any material to them, but they lushly illustrated the curves of her body. They seemed designed to embarrass the wearer. This form-fitting clothing was covered up by a long tunic. If a Japanese person was present, he might see it

and think, "This must be a bunnygirl from some high-class nightclub." Zorzal slowed down so Tyuule could catch up with him, and spoke quietly. "The antics end here. The most important thing is to gain the approval of the troops. In addition, we must maintain relations with the pro-war faction. Once the defeatists relax, we'll pounce on them in one fell swoop, so now is the time for us to get some pawns for us to use." "Y-yes, I understand." "Ahh, what a pain! At a crucial time like this, I need to mess up their negotiations by any means!" In his eyes, the end of a war meant a military victory, and a perfect victory would be icing on the cake. And now, the war was going to end without fulfilling either of these criteria. Zorzal felt that a conclusion like this did not sit well with the kind of country he intended to rule. "Of course there is no such thing as an army which does not know defeat. However, in the past, the Empire has had situations where they were temporarily at a disadvantage. Yet, did the Empire not overcome these difficulties each time? After all, the army of Nihon is only defending the area around Arnus Hill, and they have no way of doing battle in the Empire's domain. In other words, the enemy feels that invading the Empire is a tricky affair, which is why they are rushing to talk of peace. Has nobody discovered this yet?" Anyone who realised that ought to know that it was possible to fight a war against Nihon. Yet, the Emperor had succumbed so easily to the request to make peace. These actions would only benefit the enemy, Zorzal was declaring. Before long, the two of them had reached the end of the corridor, and the door to the hall lay beyond. "Father!" The

Emperor and Piña appeared before his eyes. Zorzal was about to try and convince the Emperor, but one of his followers advised him not to make noise. After all, the gathering was on the other side of the door, and however thick the wood it was made of, a loud voice would still carry through it. Zorzal resisted the impulse to shout, and then quietly but fervently tried to persuade the Emperor and Piña to forbid the peace proceedings. But the Emperor did not listen to him, nor did he intend to support the Crown Prince's demands. "Zorzal. When the war began, nobody could have expected so many unexpected developments. Since things are not going according to our desires, we are best served by ending hostilities before the damage becomes too severe." "The Empire can still fight!" "All the more reason to end this sooner rather than later. Once we can no longer go on... perhaps there may not even be the time for talks." "What happened to the pride of the Empire?!" Zorzal was trying his best to keep his voice down, but even so, this was close to a shout. He kicked the wall and said, "To think Father was such a coward." At this embarrassing moment, Tyuule stepped forward to clear the air. "Your Highness, the time is nigh. Please quell your anger." Since Zorzal was now the Crown Prince, he could not do as he pleased like he had in the past. In his current position, he had to make sure the ceremony for the return of their prisoners went well. Abdicating his duties and messing the ceremony up would be an unthinkable sin. As Tyuule helped adjust Zorzal's clothes, she surreptitiously looked at him and realised his foul mood was no longer present on his face. After a few deep

breaths, Zorzal managed to calm down. He might feel angry, but he had to nod. "I understand. I will play my part at this ceremony." "It is as you say, your Highness. Please wish the prisoners well for returning to our soil." Tyuule said in relief. "Announcing the arrival of his Imperial Majesty Emperor Molt, his Imperial Highness Prince Zorzal and her Imperial Highness Princess Piña!" As the herald spoke, the doors before them swung wide. Just then, the brilliant light of the hall beyond shone on Tyuule. But even that was only for a fleeting moment. As the sound of the doors closing carried through the long corridor, the shaft of light illuminating her grew narrower and narrower until the doors were shut. In the abnormally silent and darkened hallway, Tyuule lowered her head and muttered, "What a simple man." Then, she spoke, as though to someone, "Is everything ready?" As she finished, a garbled voice came from a seemingly empty corner. "Yes, all is ready. We have made ample preparations, so please look forward to the results, kihihihhi~" "I will not permit failures like last time. That is what comes of leaving the important work to others." "I have no excuses for the failure to assassinate Noriko. That is why I have summoned the elite of our tribe, Ukushi, Kakushi and Kurume." Three shadows suddenly appeared in the darkened hallway. "Then, proceed. Let me see what havoc you can wreak." Tyuule grinned evilly as she raised her head. *** The ministers, patricians, officials, officers and the others welcomed Zorzal and the others with a round of applause. According to etiquette, the country's leader would be first, followed by Zorzal, and then Piña. The imperial

family would meet first with the ministers and senators, and then the Japanese delegates, who were the most important people in this event. The released prisoners were placed at the end. However, when Zorzal arrived, he went straight for the prisoners, who were by the side and out of sight. Then, he began calling their names, and patting these confused people on the shoulder. "Viscount Helm, you've returned!" "Your, your Highness. Thank you for your concern." "You're the son of Marquis Karasta, am I correct? Are you well?" "I am grateful that a beaten officer like myself could receive your Highness' concern..." Zorzal smiled secretly. This event was to celebrate the return of their prisoners, so nobody had any reason to stop him. Emperor Molt, Piña's aides and the guests in presence had not expected Zorzal to misbehave himself and not play by the rules. They could only stare at Zorzal doing as he pleased, unable to interfere. "Your Highness, perhaps it is time for yourself to return..." one of the aides nervously suggested. Zorzal ignored the aide's reminder. Instead, he began asking about the difficulties these prisoners had gone through. His ears were poised to listen to their complaints, and from his attitude he clearly opposed the peace talks. The Emperor looked at his back, and sighed deeply. "Leave him to it. He will speak to the captives, while I will proceed with the following events." After the Emperor's statements, the events involving Zorzal had to be cancelled. The Crown Prince's willfulness made the guests frown, so everyone had no choice but to ignore him and go on with the proceedings. However, Zorzal's attitude moved the former captives. After all, ever since they

had been imprisoned, they had spent every day under the supervision of guards who did not speak their language, fearing, “Will I be executed today?” or “Will I be sold as a slave tomorrow?” In truth, they had not been ill-treated. What made them uneasy was the fear that they would be treated the same way the Empire treated their prisoners of war. If they regretted their actions, these imprisoned Imperial leaders would surely rethink their conduct in the future. However, it was now too late to think of such things. After all, as prisoners, they did not know what suffering they would meet in the future. In that climate of unease, the footsteps of their guards were like the sound of the Grim Reaper approaching. As they held their breath and listened, they feared that those footsteps would stop outside their cell door. And now that they had returned safely to their country, they had to worry if they would be accepted by their people. After all, they were stained by the ignominy of having been taken prisoners, and they were worried that they would be treated coldly when they returned. Because of this, the Crown Prince had disregarded the proper procedure and gone to the prisoners when he should have met the Japanese delegates. His warm words and comforting pats on the shoulder filled their hearts with warmth. In addition, Zorzal’s concern for the prisoners was genuine, and not an act. After all, he had been beaten and insulted as they had. The events of the night of the earthquake were an indelible scar on his pride. Ever since that night, the smiles of the maids as he passed them in the hallway felt like mockery; the whispered words of passing officials felt like

they were criticizing him. The only way Zorzal could preserve his pride was to tell himself, "That was a stratagem to make Father think I was useless." "All the headache-inducing things I have done up to now were on purpose." "Being beaten by a woman was painful, but there's no need to dwell on it." Shortly after, his hard work was rewarded. The Emperor, who was reluctant to let go of his power, had named Zorzal his successor. This was because Zorzal's antics made the Emperor think that he was a useless puppet who would dance on his strings. However, after becoming the Crown Prince, he could not act as he wished. The wounds on his body had healed, and after applying dentures made of wyvern scale, his physical appearance had been fully restored. Zorzal decided to discard his previous act, and let others realise his true ability. And then, the Emperor chose to disregard Zorzal's actions. Normally, without the Crown Prince, the events could not continue, but the Emperor simply said, "Let him be." In the end, the others around the Emperor agreed with him and ignored Zorzal. Zorzal sneaked a glance around him, and saw that the Emperor was greeting the Japanese delegates. This was the time to formally recognize the Japanese contingent as ambassadors. After that, the Empire could officially begin the talks that Zorzal had so strenuously opposed. At this time, the released prisoners pleaded with Zorzal. "I should be grateful for the chance to return to our country, but I can't just sit there and see our Empire bound by unfair terms." "Your Highness, give us a chance to wipe away our previous mistakes!" They quietly pleaded with Zorzal to give them another chance. "Be

patient for a while. The war is not yet over. I will give you all an opportunity to show your true strength. I need more time.” After hearing him, the prisoners looked at Zorzal with hopeful eyes and said, “We will obey you.” Those eyes were the only ones turned to him. Normally, everyone in court should have been looking at him, the Crown Prince. “Still, why did it turn out this way...?” Zorzal gritted his teeth when he realised the Emperor had completely ignored him. *** “Speaking of which, Princess Piña, do you know about the Flame Dragon’s head that was hung on the city gate?” “I have seen it with my own eyes. Truly a heart-pounding sight.” “I saw it too, but it did not seem as fearsome as the legends told. Flame Dragon or not, it seems anyone with a bit of skill could have taken it down.” “Indeed, I concur. The legends spoke of many heroes failing to subdue the Dragon... could it be that they were just weak?” The young patrician men were relaxedly chatting with Piña and sharing their thoughts. Under normal circumstances, the 10 ren (roughly 16 meters) area around her would be designated a danger area which all males should avoid as much as possible, but today seemed special, because Piña was surrounded by many boys. Piña, who had been sampling food in the corner, was quite surprised by this development. At the same time, she was quietly watching them, to see what they planned to achieve by approaching her. “Your Highness, you seem to be in a good mood.” Piña nodded and replied, “Mm, I am.” The truth was that this was a joyous day for the Imperial Princess Piña Co Lada. She could finally shrug off the burden weighing down on her shoulders. During the Battle of Italica,

the JSDF had made their strength abundantly clear, and during the visit to Tokyo, what she had seen in that country called Japan made her realise that continuing the war would be suicide. In order to avert the Empire's destruction, she had to do everything she could to end the war with Japan. Because of that, on most days, Piña had gone around with a melancholy expression on her face. Of course, she also felt that even if the basic aim was to make peace, the Empire should not roll over and accept every single condition the other side proposed. Otherwise, even if the Empire managed to limp along, the livelihoods of the people would be wrecked. When that happened, even the Imperial Capital would become an empty ruin which could not support human habitation. Earlier, Sugawara had informed her of Japan's terms in an informal manner... for instance, an astronomical sum of compensation. If they tried to accumulate the money to pay up, even the neighboring countries would be plunged into an economic crisis, to say nothing of the Empire itself. Therefore, her new objective would be to find some way to lower the amount payable. Although the peace talks had started, the situation was far more dire than fighting a battle. The Empire had very few chips they could use for leverage. Even so, this was no longer something Piña had to worry about. The peace talks would be attended by representatives chosen by the Emperor. This meant that she only had to continue being a mediator for both sides, and maintain the relationship they had built with Japan so far. Of course, that included training up translators, arranging various activities, immersing herself in Japanese

culture and other chores. Compared to that, the duties she had handled in the past were hardly worth mentioning. As she thought about that, relief flooded through her heart. The days of worrying about the Empire and being depressed by day and sleepless by night would be over. She could hand the cleanup after the party to Hamilton, and the thought of that freedom filled Piña with relaxation. "I've felt this way before..." She had felt the same way at the garden party she had organized with Sugawara, when she had successfully convinced the pro-war Senators about the importance of making peace. However, after her brother Zorzal barged in all of a sudden, and learning that Count Marx was working against them behind the scenes, she had to take up the burden she thought she had put down. What kind of scheme was Minister of the Interior Count Marx hatching? Piña felt that whatever it was, it was not good, so she had no choice but to be on her guard. After that, there had been several incidents which threatened to derail the peace process. The brawl in front of the Emperor, the request to free the kidnapped Japanese, and the destruction of the Senate. There was even the attempted assassination of Noriko. Every time one of these things happened, Piña's gut would swell, her head would ache, she would get dizzy and nauseous, among other things, and deep wrinkles would appear on her brow. However, these worrisome things would end today. "Things being what they are, there's no need to worry. No matter what happens, the peace talks will go though." After all the trials she had gone through to date, caution was now part of her personality. Her pessimistic imagination was finally starting

to cleave to reality. Given the current circumstances, no matter how hard Piña tried to imagine things, she could not visualize anything which could upset the present situation. As long as nothing happens to Father, there'll be no problems. Because of that, Piña's expression was one that only a successful individual who had overcome scores of difficult problems would possess. In this calm and peaceful state, the curve of her lip and her soft, velvet cheeks broadcast a wave of feminine appeal that snared the souls of all the surrounding men. "Oh, she's too beautiful." "Your Highness. In future, please continue blessing us with your radiant smile." The patrician boys were entranced by Piña, and gathered to praise her grace and beauty. Feeling a little embarrassed, Piña held her face with one hand, curling her hair around her finger. At this point, she was doubly sure of one thing — she was feeling very relaxed now. "So that's what it was all about..." Piña tried her best to put on a look of elegant grace. "The Flame Dragon is not worth being afraid of, you say. I shall engrave those words into my heart. The Empire needs talented individuals like you gentlemen. However, nobody has discussed how best to harness your courage and ability. Therefore, I hope you gentlemen will voluntarily enlist, lead troops into battle, and burn brightly for the Empire." Once she finished, the stammered replies came in from all around her. "Ah, no, well... about that..." "My family has produced generations of bureaucrats, so I need to carry on the family tradition." And they all took half a step back. "Aw, what a disappointment. If only you gents could enlist with the same courage you use to

chase girls, I might become closer to you. Don't you think so, Shandy?" "Indeed, your Highness." The woman called Shandy Kaf Marea was one of the female knights who had been called back to the Capital along with Bozes in order to translate for the peace talks that would start tomorrow. She was only 17, but her linguistic knowledge could be put to use immediately in her role as an interpreter. Her chestnut brown hair was tied into a braid, and she radiated an air of elegant charm. Since Hamilton was busy today, Shandy took her place as Piña's attendant. "The doors of the Imperial Army will forever be open to you." "Mm. Currently, the Imperial Army is undermanned, so promotions will be easy. After all, we are still at war, so chances to prove yourself will be commonplace." "Exactly. Also, they say the country of Nihon does not trade in slaves, so if you are captured, you may rest easy." "And if that happens, you can rest assured that I will work to persuade them to release you. However, that might take around ten years..." As she said this, the patrician youths started recalling urgent things to do, and they left in a manner that resembled fleeing. In an instant, the area around Piña was devoid of male presences. "Hmm. Do you think I overdid it?" Piña seemed to be scorning the boys as they fled, and she hmped in disgust. At the same time, she coughed on something she brought up into her throat. "I haven't had the pleasure of seeing your Highness' razor tongue in action for a while. It was a most refreshing experience." "It has been a while since I managed to vent on other people. I feel quite refreshed now." More accurately, she had not had the free time to mock people. One

could imagine the pressures that had been dogging Piña up till now. “But if nobody brought it up, I would not have known that someone hung the Flame Dragon’s head on the city gate. Is it true?” “Indeed it is. I had my suspicions at first, so I went to verify it myself. The Flame Dragon looked like how the old people described it. Judging by its fearsome appearance, I am sure it is the real thing. Piña coughed again, and quietly said, “Itami-dono, did you succeed at last?” “Your Highness, while I believe it is only proper to relax after doing good work, stuffing your face with cake like that is like despoiling a natural landmark.” Naturally, the “landmark” of which Shandy spoke was a stern yet beautiful thing. After hearing that, Piña hastily washed down her cake with a mouthful of wine, and dabbed at her mouth with a handkerchief. “Did Itami-dono succeed at last? I hope he is well...” This time, she managed to speak those words out loud. Shandy applauded as she heard it. “ I’m sure he’ll be fine.” “Do you know the facts of the matter?” “How shall I say this... I wrote the report myself. I was in Arnus before Itami-sama left, and I don’t know what happened after that, so I was worried as well. But it’s good that he’s made it through that trial intact. Shandy’s joyful expression was as though she were describing her own activities. Piña looked at her with surprised eyes, and then said, in a vaguely reproachful and suspicious tone, “So you wrote that report. I thought it was some sort of prologue to a heroic epic...” “Your Highness, I hope you can praise me with a ‘Well done, Shandy’.” Just then, a wave of pain shot through Piña’s head. Shandy’s essay was well-written, and it was plain

that her appreciation of art had taken a great leap forward. However, objectivity was the essence of a report, and so Piña carefully reminded Shandy to take more care in future. “The report was very detailed, so I have no doubts. However, writing Tuka into a man was too much.” After that, Shandy shrank and said, “I’m very sorry.” “Although, I eagerly look forward to subsequent reports. I am quite interested in how Itami-dono did battle with the Flame Dragon.” “Indeed. Panache-nee-sama is collecting information now, and she will return soon. I am all wakuwaku in anticipation.”

“Wakuwaku?” “Yes, wakuwaku tekateka. It refers to a state where one’s heart beats rapidly, and one’s skin glistens. The meaning is roughly ‘my heart beats rapidly in anticipation, and my excitement is such that my skin glows from the thin layer of sweat upon it.’” Shandy clasped her hands in front of her chest as she related the term she learned from Arnus, with a dreamy expression on her face. As Piña saw this, she began to worry for the state of Shandy’s mental health. “What’s wrong? Are you alright?” “Yes, I am feeling very well. Although I left for Arnus on your Highness’ order, in truth I could not muster up the motivation at first. However, after witnessing several things for myself, I began to feel that I would have volunteered myself, even without your order...” The truth was that Shandy had been given secret orders to seduce Itami. Because Panache, leader of the White Rose Knights, had been ordered to Arnus for language classes, Piña had intended to let Shandy inherit the position of the White Rose Knight Leader. However, Panache had stubbornly. said, “I wish to go to Arnus with

Onee-sama". Piña had given her those orders as a condition of sending her over. As a result, Shandy had been very interested in Itami's activities. "Haa... Let's set this mission aside for the time being. Do not act without my express permission." "Ehh~ Whyyyyy~ You're so meeeean~ yo~ur~High~ness~" Shandy pouted to Piña, her lips pursed like the mouth of a porcelain teapot. This made Piña think of Shandy's hobby; she liked to worship famous people. For instance, the champion of a martial arts tournament, or a handsome male actor amidst a sea of female actresses. Anyone could see that a person who could defeat a Flame Dragon would be the object of admiration for a girl like herself. Still, while she might have been given the order of "seduction", if she developed actual feelings for him, that would be bad. "I'd advise you not to act incautiously around him." Piña warned. "Ehhhhh~ whyyyy~?" A few reasons came to mind, but to Piña, the most important — and most troubling — reason was that she did not wish to offend Risa, the source and a creator of the "fine art" that Piña so loved. "But aren't the two of them already divorced?" "The truth about the relationship between a man and a woman cannot be easily learned by looking at the surface of matters. I lack experience with such matters and do not fully understand their mysteries, but I can be sure that they are always messy and troublesome. Shandy, even if you told me 'I can't hold back this feeling any more', I would not relieve you of the mission you have been tasked with. Missions like these are hard to hand to someone that I do not trust completely." And if true feelings actually developed, Piña would have to consider the

possibility of betrayal. “Uuu... does that mean I won’t be able to go to Arnus anymore?” “Indeed.” “I don’t like that. I don’t like that at all. However... I understand, I’ll bear with it.” Shandy drooped her shoulders in despair. “Are you really alright?” “I will... try...” As she finished that, she puffed up her cheeks and looked up, her unhappiness plain on her face. In contrast, Piña was done reproaching her, and she stuffed her mouth with a dessert she had been holding. “Then, I shall personally view the Flame Dragon’s head. I believe it was at the city gate...” she said as she rose. “Your Highness, you’ve stuffed your mouth again. Your cheeks are bloated, it is truly a crime against nature.” This time, the “nature” of which Shandy spoke referred to her charm and presence. Piña motioned to Shandy to wait as she hurriedly chewed and swallowed the food. “These desserts are a gift from Nihon, it would be a shame if I did not try them. Besides, if you want to talk about eating habits, aren’t you eating as much as I am?” “We are playing different roles. I may be a patrician, but since my status is low, a minor faux pas can be forgiven by everyone on account of my cuteness. However, your Highness’ beauty and refinement is a “charm point” in your position an Imperial Princess. Therefore, you must never do things which would sully your Highness’ image.” “Really?” “Mm, yes. And speaking of the Flame Dragon’s head, the Emperor has already ordered it taken down, so it is no longer at the city gate.” “How... how fast.” “It can already be considered fairly slow. After all, it has been there from dawn to dusk, and the gawkers blocked the roads up.” Thanks to that, traffic in the Imperial Capital had

been paralyzed all day. "Then, where is the Flame Dragon's head now?" "About that..." Shandy touched her chin with an index finger, a confused look on her face, but an instant later, she cheered up again. "...it's over there." As Piña looked in the direction which Shandy's finger was pointing, she was just in time to see the Flame Dragon's head being carried in. *** The Flame Dragon's head was very large, and very heavy. It had required 20 strong soldiers to lift and move it. How had it gotten onto the roof of the gatehouse tower? She kept thinking about that point. Count Marx's report had said, "Though we are still investigating, we have not learned anything significant so far." "To think nobody noticed despite it happening at the main gate. How sad is that?" the Emperor sighed as he furrowed his brows. "I understand your Majesty's displeasure, but please consider that the Imperial Capital is a metropolis of over a million souls. The crowds pass through the gate day and night. In addition, the gates have never been shut for over 200 years. The patrols only come by at fixed intervals. Once night falls, people will only focus on the ground beneath their feet, and not on what is above them." Count Marx explained in a convincing tone. A long time ago, the gates of the Imperial City would shut at nightfall, and then the sentries would look around with wary eyes, But now, wagons bearing goods came in and out even in the dead of night. Moving items around the city gate was nothing new, and would not attract attention." "It can't be helped. However, the investigation must continue. In particular, the places frequented by the Flame Dragon. Pay attention to the tribes,

settlements and the movements of our allies.” “Understood.” After giving the order, Molt reached his hand out to caress the chin of the Flame Dragon’s head. He tapped it a few times to test its hardness. After feeling the feedback from the uneven and solid surface below his fingers, he stroked it to feel the wall of impenetrable armor its scales produced. It would be impervious to swords or bows. Its teeth were more impressive still. The smallest were the size of a grown man’s thumb, while the largest were as thick as a woman’s slender arm. It seemed the legends of Dragons being able to chew through stone towers were not exaggerated. The Dragon’s eyeball was nowhere to be found, yet the empty socket was still bone-chilling. This was the proper feeling that a Flame Dragon, bringer of terror and despair, should inspire. The head itself was already so large — the size of its body, from wingtip to wingtip and snout to tail, would beggar the imagination. From ancient times, legends of the Flame Dragon struck fear into the hearts of men, so people imagined it to be a beast beyond the bounds of reality. As it turned out, the truth of the beast was not far behind the legend surrounding it. Before he realised, there were a crowd of guests gathered to look at the Flame Dragon’s head. The gawkers were so frightened by the fearsome visage of the huge draconic head and its teeth that their bodies trembled. Just then, Molt turned around and addressed the guests who were looking at the head. “Ladies and gentlemen, please, take heed. This is the head of the Flame Dragon which appeared in the Imperial Capital and struck fear into the hearts of many. In the past, not only did it lay waste to

cities, but it also slew many. The lives of the people were miserable beyond words. However, that accursed creature is now a corpse. There is nothing to fear from it. Let us treat this as a gift from the gods, and celebrate this memorable day!"

"Your Majesty, who was responsible for this?" an officer asked. The answer was one that everyone present was looking forward to. "The facts of the matter are not yet clear, and I have heard that there are people spreading lies about this. No matter what, we cannot make a hasty decision about this, so I feel this matter should not be discussed here. After the appropriate investigations are made, I will make sure I enlighten everyone on the subject." After that announcement, Emperor Molt left. Then, as though to fill the gap he left, the ones watching from far away came closer, bringing their faces close to the surface of the Dragon's head. Some even went to touch the gaps between the Dragon's teeth, and they all discussed their opinions of the head. "Your Majesty!" Molt turned around as he heard Piña's voice. "Oh, Piña, I was looking for you." he said. Then he stepped out of the crowd, in order to touch his daughter's shoulder. Piña asked her father, "Did the Men in Green do this?" "Indeed. Earlier, when I received your report, I could hardly believe it, so I merely skimmed it. Now that I think about it, I must thank you for your hard work." "Please, do not blame yourself so. It could not be helped. The fact is that when I drafted the report, I could scarcely believe it myself." "Then, have you learned anything new? We must reward them for their great achievement."

"Five people went forth to purge the Flame Dragon: Itami,

Rory, Lelei, Tuka and Yao. I sent someone to observe their movements. Perhaps you could ask her for more details.” Piña introduced Shandy to the Emperor as she explained herself. Molt seemed particularly interested in one of the names. “You mentioned Rory?” “Yes. That would be the Apostle of Emroy, Rory Mercury.” “Oh, if she was part of their group, then the elimination of the Flame Dragon would be a matter of course. Still, it is hard to believe someone could persuade one of the Apostles, revered in the same breath as the gods, to lend her aid. Perhaps it was a whim of hers? ...Although if that is the case, the glory will go to the gods, and not to the Men in Green, as the rumors say.” “That would be incorrect. Itami Youji is one of the Men in Green.” “Itami? That name sounds familiar.” Piña nervously said, “He was... the man who struck Ani-sama, before your presence.” Molt muttered, “So it was him.” with a crestfallen look on his face. “So the Men in Green are enemies after all... Then, how about the others?” “Tuka is an Elf of the Rodo Forest, while Yao is a Dark Elf of the Schwarz Forest.” Perhaps he was displeased, but the Emperor seemed more and more depressed, muttering, “More non-humans.” Then, when he heard Shandy’s words, he cheered up and smiled. “The last member of the group was Lelei La Lelena. She is a disciple of Sage Kato, and a resident of Coda Village.” “Oh, that Master Kato! Is she human?!” Shandy was a little confused by the sudden change in the Emperor’s attitude, but she answered him. “Y-yes, she is. She is one of the Rurudo people... she seems to have settled in Coda Village so we can consider her a citizen of the Empire.” The Emperor nodded, smiling brightly as he

muttered, "Yes, yes..." "Marvellous! This is truly welcome news. I am relieved to hear that a member of the Empire aided in the slaying of the Flame Dragon. Piña, find that Lelei person and invite her here. Listen well, this is an order. You must accomplish it by any means necessary. Do you understand?" Emperor Molt was suddenly overjoyed, as though a switch had been flipped within him. Then he spread his arms, and announced the news he had just heard to all the guests. The unexpected thing was the vigorous applause that news garnered. The mood in the hall had been pleasant enough, but people had not overly displayed that joy. That was because the people in the Empire did not wish to have to loudly thank an outsider for slaying the Flame Dragon. To members of the ruling class, doing so would be gravely regrettable and damaging to their pride. However, if they could praise a member of the Empire for exterminating the Flame Dragon, that would be a different matter. It would be something about which they could be proud. In this world, those who made great accomplishments not only earned great glory for themselves, and it would be a potent diplomatic tool for their countries of origin. If someone could win the approval of other countries or tribes, then once that exalted person showed up, even his fellow countrymen would benefit from the glory reflected of him, and their influence would skyrocket. For example, someone like this would be like an athlete who gathered all manner of Olympic gold medals and world cups to himself. While such a person may not exist, if such a person did exist, he would be praised by all the people of the world,

who would gather to cheer in unison, “Incredible, incredible” for him. Starting with the Elbe Kingdom, many other tribes and nations had bestowed knighthoods or honorary chieftainships on Itami, one after the other. They did this to draw closer to him, and gain benefits from affiliation with him. Thus, their actions were not purely to praise him. Similarly, the Emperor would laud Lelei for her accomplishments. The answer to the question, “Where does Lelei La Lelena, pupil of Master Kato hail from?” would spread through the Empire and its surrounding territories like wildfire. And of course, the happier the nobles were, the more upset a certain man became. The black flames of jealousy burned fiercely in Zorzal’s heart. Hatred flowed throughout his body, and he clenched his fists so hard the nails broke his flesh and caused his blood to flow. He glared viciously at the Dragon’s head and at the Emperor himself. “Dammit... What’s so great about killing a mere Flame Dragon?” As the Crown Prince, Zorzal had no choice but to endure the ignominy of being ignored, while someone who was not even here earned the praise and respect of everyone present. To Zorzal, that was an unforgivable sin. It was absolutely unforgivable that he was not the one being praised by all, that he was not the one bringing victory and glory to the Empire. Nor could he forgive the man who made that announcement. If pressed, he would say it was because the name he announced was not Zorzal, but that Lelei La whatever. Why was he praising an outsider so generously, but his own son, not at all?” Unforgivable. This is absolutely unforgivable. I want to kill them all. That man, that

Lelei, I want to kill them all! After that, the hatred in Zorzal's heart seemed to have become a form of strength. "Everyone, let us drink a toast in celebration of this joyous occasion!"

Emperor Molt led everyone in the toast, as the clinks of glasses echoed back and forth throughout the hall. Just then, a golden wine goblet fell to the ground. Following which, a scream shattered the sudden silence. Before anyone could react, the Emperor had fallen on his back, facing the sky.

「古都の夜景か。
何回見ても
良いな」

「父さん。
そろそろ
来るんでしょ？
支度しなさいよ」

「そう。
『とうきよう』のように
明るくない燈火。
燭台にゆらめく
頼りない炎」

「ちよつとお……
何を雰囲気
つくつてるのお？」



Chapter 2

A HMYV raced over the sprawling, grassy plains, under the light of the radiant sun.

It threw up a trail of dust as it roamed leisurely over the plains, speeding towards the horizon as if aiming for the clouds in the distance.

Inside the vehicle, the sounds of the engine blended with those of a lute.

The lute's player was Tuka Luna Marceau, who rode in the back seat. She was an elf girl who worshipped Lunaru, the goddess of music.

Her fingernails — which looked as pink as seashells — strummed the instrument's strings, producing beautiful melodies which sounded like they had been made by a virtuoso musician. Were she to play in Japan, she would be able to pack the concert hall full of people, with extra patrons squeezing in to occupy the standing room. Or at least, that was how Itami Youji — who was unfamiliar with the music world — imagined it would be as he drew on his memories of relevant manga.

“Then, what shall I play next?”

“How about something livelier?”

After requesting a song from Tuka, Itami looked down at his watch, and then at a map, and then back at the watch again. He repeated this several times.

“All right, Father.”

With that, Tuka took up the lute again.

“Come on, Tuka, can’t you call me something other than Father?” Itami said as he kept his eyes on the map. It was partly because he was busy with what he was doing, but also because he was embarrassed about being called ‘Father’.

“Don’t~ Want~ To~. Besides, it’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

For some reason, Tuka’s face and the tips of her ears had flushed red.

“And, and besides, how could I call you Y-Youjy? My instincts would keep me from...”

She trailed off into mumbling. Given the way she was speaking to herself in a small voice, it would seem that she could only relax while addressing him as “Father”.

“Keep you from what?”

“It’s~ no~thing~”

Tuka was whining a little to try and drop the subject. Then she began playing a cheerful melody, as Itami had requested.

From what he could understand of the lyrics, the song was a humorous tale about a girl who was in love with a certain man. The girl tried everything she could to get the man’s attention only for all her attempts to end in failure, leaving her to sigh over and over. However, in the end the girl’s wish came true. More accurately, her wish had already been granted since the beginning.

“That was beautiful. How long have you been playing this instrument?”

Tuka seem vaguely unconcerned with Itami’s question as she replied, “Let me think. I guess it’s been over a hundred years.”

As she said this, her pointy ears began twitching up and down.

“O-over a hundred years...”

Should he be impressed by this? Or should he nod, because it was only natural that she would reach a standard like that after a hundred years of practice? Itami did not know how to respond.

“Are all Elves this amazing?”

“Yes, we are. An Elf of my age usually has a favored instrument of their own.”

“Ah... I see.”

Then, what about the other Elf?

Itami turned his gaze to the female Dark Elf by Tuka’s side.

As their eyes met, Yao shyly laughed “ahaha”, nodded and said: “Yes, that’s right.”

“And what instrument are you good at Yao?”

“I can play the flute... but it’s just a hobby. I’ve never actually performed for strangers. Of course, you’re not a stranger, and I would gladly play for you. However, this sort of thing is better with nobody else around. Although, it’s early right now, so would you be willing to wait for tonight... Owwww~”

Though she had (uncomfortably) tried to conceal her intentions by stating them in a roundabout way, it was quite obvious from her lewd tone that she was intending to seduce Itami. Halfway through, however, her spiel suddenly ended in a strange yelp.

Given that Itami was in the vehicle commander's seat, he had no idea what was going on. However, Rory — who was behind that seat — and Tuka — who was opposite her — seemed to be swishing their legs around for some unknown reason.

“It's embarrassing if I don't get to help!” “How can you call that sort of thing ‘helping’?” The girls took their shots at each other, and their whispered back and forth came to Itami's ears.

What are they up to? Itami thought. When he turned around and leaned back to check on what was going on behind him, Tuka frantically changed the topic, as though she wanted to cover up their earlier squabble.

“Fa-father, he... my father Hodryur played the sitar very well, and they say his music could entrance anyone who heard it.”

“Really? So your music teacher was your own father, Tuka.”

Tuka froze as she heard those words, and then continued, “I didn’t have a teacher.”

“Then who taught you?”

Tuka tilted her head, a confused expression on her face.

For Elves, their talent for music was an inborn thing, so they had no idea what that question meant, and no idea of how to answer. Tuka was in a similar situation.

However, Yao seemed to sense Tuka’s difficulty and lent her a helping hand.

According to Yao, Elves were not a race that specially sought people out to learn how to practice the arts. Even basic things like martial arts and spirit magic were learned by seeing and doing, and the rest was all a matter of personal devotion, practice and experience.

“So, rather than say that she had no mentor, it would be better to say that everyone around her was her mentor.”

“Ah... I see.”

For example, one would not need a teacher to learn how to speak, or to learn how to perform trivial everyday tasks. One normally picked these fundamentals up just living day

by day, and Tuka was in a similar situation. Because of that, the Elves did not think better or worse of each other by their proficiency in various skills. While this was not necessarily true for all Elves, they generally saw things like natural ability as a fairly dull topic. To the Elves, if someone could not master a certain skill after a long time, that person was merely a late bloomer; whereas if someone was very skilled in a certain aspect, they simply said that he had invested a lot of time and effort into his craft. In fact, the thought of someone actually knuckling down and training long hours in order to surpass others within a particular field was something like “obsession” to the Elves, and they thought poorly of such things.

“If you thoughtlessly try to plant a tree, and force it to conform to your will, then even if you planted that tree on fertile soil, gave it ample water, and used the power of the spirits on it... in the end, that tree would still grow into an unnatural form. Don’t you think so? We Elves obey the rules of nature — we seek unity and understanding in nature, and aim to live balanced lives.”

Elves had much longer lifespans than humans, and thus they spent a lot of time on anything they did. The elves would only take out their instruments and play if they wanted to enjoy their music. After about one or two hundred years of this, they would naturally become masterful performers.

“I see. No wonder people say, those who excel or stand out in some field are usually weirdos.”

To the elves, learning techniques from masters and passing own techniques were things which existed for those short-lived races who wanted to improve themselves. However, it was because of the elves’ attitude — their habit of doing things slowly and completing tasks over hundreds of years — that the human race managed to conquer the world.

“Humans reject the paradigms with which we Elves view the world.”

As a human himself, Itami scratched his head and mumbled:

“Well, I don’t know what to think of your situation. I wonder how Beethoven or Mozart would respond to you.”

“Say, Youjy. Who are these people you’re talking about?”

Rory raised her body over Itami’s shoulders, and planted both her hands there. At the same time, her black hair cascaded down over his shoulders with a quiet rustle.

“In my world, they were composers. They lived hundreds of years ago, but the music they wrote has endured until

today. Apparently, they were pretty eccentric for their time.”

If they knew about Elves, would they be jealous of them? Just as Itami mulled this over, a gaze came from the driver’s seat that seem to be saying: “I have something to say.”

The gaze’s owner, Lelei, gripped the steering wheel tightly.

“You...”

“You what?” Itami asked. Just then, he heard the sound of another engine — clearly different from the HMY’s — coming close. Before Lelei could continue, Itami’s attention was drawn away.

“Oh! It’s here, it’s here!”

Itami eagerly looked to the sky, and shouted over the radio:

“I have visual confirmation of the aircraft. Drop the package!”

“No need to sign and stamp the delivery order, but please, bring back some souvenirs! See you!”

The voice from the radio's speaker belonged to the plane's pilot. Shortly after that, a C-1 medium transport plane swooped over them, its turbojets roaring through the clear blue sky. The sound of the exhaust was so powerful that it completely drowned out Tuka's playing.

Thus, the C-1 transport made a low pass over the ground.

Then, a large crate fell from above Itami and the others, popping free as if it had broken through its bindings.

"Ah! It'll break if it falls from such a high place!"

"Watch out!"

This violent method of delivery made Tuka and Yao exclaim in surprise.

However, the crate's parachute opened immediately, braking its fall. It would be difficult to call that descent "slow", but at least it did not seem like it was going to strike the ground with a tremendous impact any more.

"Lelei, head toward the direction where the crate dropped."

Lelei gripped the steering wheel tightly as Itami pointed toward the falling parachute.



“...Understood.”

Though Lelei looked like she was wavering between speaking and silence, in the end she nodded slightly, and with a turn of the steering wheel, the HMTV changed its course.

Itami, the ex-commander of 3rd Recon, had a new mission — to investigate resources in the Special Region.

Simply put, his main objective was to travel around the special region and search for any ore deposits in the places he visited. The brass went on to point him toward locations which might contain oil or rare earth deposits. However, there was an elephant in the room which had to be addressed in order to accomplish that mission.

—Namely, that Itami himself was neither a geologist or a mineralogist.

There were those expert geologists who could look at a small rock and determine whether or not an ore was present. People like that typically ended up working in the mining or construction industries. In contrast, when Itami looked at a rock, all he saw was a rock. Therefore, in order

to properly conduct the investigation, they needed native guides to help pick up news from local residents. In addition, they needed to get a rough grasp of the resource distribution in the area from these rumors.

“Yes, got it. Though, I didn’t expect the brass to actually let me go investigate by myself. That was quite surprising.”

The truth was, Itami’s superior Maj. Higaki was worried about Itami. Would Itami end up with depression after his suspension ended and he had nothing to do?

“Are you still saying that? Wasn’t it you who ran off to the Elbe Kingdom in order to investigate their underground resources, not long ago?”

This was what the authorities had to say about Itami going AWOL to slay the Flame Dragon: “In the course of executing out his resource-prospecting mission, 1LT Itami coincidentally encountered a Class A Dangerous Beast, known as a Dragon, and slew it with the help of locals”. Those were the official contents of the after-action report.

“Well, how could I do it by myself? The girls were there to help back then.”

“Then, recruit local assistants this time as well. We’ve already budgeted for those expenses.”

Higaki flipped through a binder, and showed Itami a spreadsheet.

The brass had given their approval after being shown reports on the discovery of raw diamonds and oil, so the budget for resource prospecting had been greatly increased. While that was certainly an unexpected surprise, further funding for these activities would only come if they could continue to show appropriate results. They could not celebrate just because their budget was increased for the moment.

Itami’s finger traced the numbers on the spreadsheet, and he was shocked.

“Uwah... one, ten, hundred, thousand, ten thousand, hundred thousand, million... are there really so many expenses to pay off?”

“These pencil-pushers feel that if they throw money at a problem, they’ll get results. Thanks to them, we’ll be sending other people on resource-prospecting missions besides you.”

“More money is good, right? We should be happy that the brass gave us all this budget. Though, I have a question; are the locals that we hire with money really reliable?”

“You’re not the only one who’s been on good terms with the locals. Of course, they aren’t as visible as you are. Besides, the Dark Elves that you helped volunteered to assist us.”

“Those Dark Elves? When did they...”

“They came calling while you were suspended. They said, ‘We finally took back our homeland and gained a measure of peace, but our homes were destroyed while we were hiding, so we wanted to come work for a wage’, ‘Please give us jobs’, and so on. Also, the Elbe Kingdom sent people over as well.”

“I can’t believe that old gramps was actually a king. Finding that out stunned me for a bit. Although, we did happen to help them in their hour of need.”

“Well, they’ve all got ulterior motives. However, we won’t have to worry about them betraying us, at least. That’s the most important thing. In any case, you’d better get to work on this mission. Got it, Itami?”

“Yes, sir! Understood!”

Itami crisply snapped off a textbook salute, and just as he was about to turn and leave his commander’s office —

“Ah, that’s right, hang on.”

Itami froze mid-movement as Higaki called out to him. He turned around and asked, “Anything else?”

“I almost forgot to give this to you.”

Higaki handed Itami a payslip. He flipped through it, and was shocked. He even wondered if there was something wrong with his eyes.

“One, ten, hundred, thousand, ten thousand... uwah, this is...”

“You brought this on yourself. Didn’t someone give you a diamond as a gift? With that, your deducted pay shouldn’t be a problem, right?”

“Those are two different things, right? And it’s hard to value a diamond like that. Frankly speaking, until they properly verify its value, it’s just an ornament.”

After receiving the raw diamond, Itami had brought it to a high-end jeweler’s shop in Ginza to have it valued.

Of course, because the diamond was not only of a high grade but because it was huge, they told Itami that it was impossible to calculate its value.

If they smashed it into pieces, they could probably sell it. However, the jeweler firmly refused him — in a careful, cautious tone — and said: ‘We could not possibly do anything as shocking as that. This diamond is precious precisely because of its vast size. If we broke it up in deference to the owner’s wishes, it would be an insult to the stone’. However, the price which corresponded to a gem of this size could not be expressed by mere numbers. If pressed, he would say that it would be an ‘astronomical’ sum. In fact, it would not be much of a stretch to say that it was a ‘radio astronomical’ number.

<TL note: In astronomy, optical telescopes are the most common types used, and they can see a long way. Radio telescopes can see even further than that. In short, the stone is really valuable.>

“I am confident that there is nobody in this country with the purchasing power to acquire this gem. The people who could afford it would probably be Arabian sheikhs or Jewish financial magnates. Our firm simply does not have the connections with big players like that, so please forgive us for not being able to introduce a buyer to you. However, you might wish to try speaking to specialized gemstone trading firms and asking around. We cannot guarantee what kind of response you will get, when that response will come, or even if you will get a response in the first place. All I can ask is that you wait patiently.”

The jeweler returned the gemstone to Itami with trembling hands as he said this.

Because of this, Itami’s finances were still in dire straits. Not only was he not an overnight millionaire (or more), he was, in fact, flat broke.

—All this was because of what had happened to Itami after slaying the Flame Dragon.

“Ehh...”

Itami took out his JSDF-issued notebook and methodically crossed out a few lines of text within its pages.

Every time he did, he sighed. This made the nearby ladies focus their attention on him.

“What’s the matter? Why so glum?”

Rory peeked out from behind the seat’s backrest and peeked into Itami’s notebook.

“What’s this?”

“Nothing, it’s just a shopping list. Since my pay’s been docked, I’ve had to cut down on expenses too. But the more I think about it, the less I want to give up on any of the items here. It would be a shame to not buy them...”

He muttered, “Can’t give this up, can’t give that up,” and then he opened up a doujin market’s list of doujin circles and lined it up next to the notebook. All this was why Itami was called an otaku. Of course, if Rory knew the truth behind all of this, she would probably have poked his head from behind, while grumbling “Don’t make me worry about this sort of thing”. That said, she could not read Japanese

characters well, so all she said was: “That’s a shame,” and then returned to her seat.

Besides Itami, only Lelei could understand Japanese characters at a glance. However, she was in the driver’s seat to the right of Itami, her hands firmly clenched around the steering wheel, watching her front while stepping on the gas. Therefore, she had no time to peek at what was in Itami’s hands.

The HMTV drove steadily on toward the north.

Since there were no man-made roads on the plains, they would occasionally encounter rocks or sinkholes along the way. Lelei the driver did not need to spend much energy to maneuver around these obstacles, which also spoke of how skilled she had become at driving around them and solving all the problems they had on the road. Of course, part of the reason that she could do all this was because of the advanced driver assistance system installed in the vehicle. But one could also turn it around and say that nobody could have expected a novice driver who had just begun learning the day before to be able to drive so well.

“Adapting to the environment is more important than learning skills in a place without traffic regulations.”

What one learned in a driving school was how to drive safely while obeying traffic regulations. However, in a place without signal lights or road signs, those skills were not as important.

Incidentally, Rory, Tuka and Yao had also tried their hand at the wheel. On that day, Itami received a grim reminder of how frightening rookie female drivers could be. In fact, he told the three of them:

“I’m not riding in any vehicle you girls are driving.”

“No matter how long it takes, those three must never, ever, under any circumstance, be allowed to touch a steering wheel”, “It’s too dangerous”, “There’ll be an accident for sure”, “Innocent bystanders will get hurt”, “In any case, it’s forbidden!”

Thus Itami evaluated their driving skills.

Therefore, only Lelei — who was very confident in her skills — was permitted to practice driving.

“She’s adapting pretty well. Though, she should be getting tired around now. Hey, come switch with me,” Itami said.

He did so out of concern for Lelei, but surprisingly enough, Lelei had no intention of stopping.

For some reason, she paid Itami's words no heed, and continued gripping the steering wheel. Shortly after that, she replied tersely:

"No need. I hope you will continue standing by."

After that, Itami looked at the side at her face for a while. He noticed that she had started wearing malachite earrings recently, and her once-skinny body was beginning to show some curves, a clear sign that she was growing up.

"Could it be... you enjoy driving?"

Lelei replied:

"Very much."

"Why, why do you like it?"

"I enjoy controlling the rudder while swiftly analyzing the conditions of the road surface and the friction of the wheels, as well as paying attention to the vehicle's mobility

and its characteristics. The effects of manipulating the rudder are instantly visible in the form of a physical change in travel. I feel that driving is a personal test of one's intellect and rationality. The vehicle itself is a construct of human intellect, and the feeling of melding with it is oddly similar to the feeling of casting a spell..."

Lelei did not stop to breathe, and kept delivering what sounded like a thesis.

"...So it's fun, huh."

While Lelei was monologuing, there was a slight change in her expression. Perhaps it would be apt to describe it as "a faint red flushing of the cheeks" or "shyness".

Until that moment, Lelei — who had been supremely focused on driving — seemed like a part of the vehicle, with no change in her expression.

After that, once she finished answering Itami's question, she added:

"Also, the Academy City of Londel is not far ahead. We'll be able to see it after crossing that ridge."

It was as Lelei said.

After crossing the peak, a new world seemed to open up before Itami's eyes: stone buildings, clustered like stars, spread out in all directions in front of him.

“Londel is an old city with a long and distinguished past. Most old cities look like this, and all sorts of races make their home here...”

From Lelei's explanations, he had learned that Londel was founded around 3000 years ago, beginning as some sort of private academy. The dual-aspected God of Wisdom Elrantola — though still a Demigod at the time — had inspired the construction of the academy.

Londel's history was longer than the Empire's, which was a point of pride for its residents. Though the neighboring countries rose and fell in a never-ending cycle, its reputation as an enduring capital of wisdom stood the test of time.

Many sages and magicians gathered here, spending their days in study and research. At the same time, younger

disciples who thirsted for knowledge came here from all over the world, studying diligently to achieve their goals.

“The word ‘Lindon’ from the ‘Lindon School’ means ‘originated from Londel’.”

“I see...”

Lelei was a disciple of the Lindon School. Itami murmured in awe as he heard of the name’s origin, and then his attention was stolen by the city’s sights.

The interior of the city was made of sun-dried bricks, mortared together with plaster. The roof overhangs were made of a single, solid piece of material. The spaces between them were narrow enough that two people could stick their arms out of the windows on facing walls and link their hands. In addition, the buildings were so old that the originally-white exteriors were now dirtied to the point where one might think they had been charred. The plaster chipped off the walls, revealing the bricks within. Sights like these could be seen all over the city. There were clear marks where masons had reapplied the plaster, and thus patches of different-looking colors everywhere on the walls. All of this made the run-down looking portions of the wall that much more obvious.

Most of the buildings were two or three stories high. The rare four-story buildings stood out from the others as they reached to the sky.

Above the narrow street, people hung laundry to dry from the second and third story windows, and their clothing swayed gently in the faint breeze.

The people on the street were a melting pot. It was much like the interior of a small inn in that both were basically exercises in how to cram as many people as possible into a small space. Because of that, the density of the people on the streets had pretty much reached its maximum point.

The road called the Central Avenue was in reality little more than five meters wide. The many people milling back and forth included Hags with baskets on their heads, Dwarves hauling lumber, aged elders (human), as well as apprentices from various species. The HMY was trapped between them — this was the same logic as a person who wanted to drive down a busy shopping street at evening.

However, if one looked around, one would see wagons heaped high with vegetables, or mounted old folks on horses who had met the same fate as the HMY. The people did not understand the concept of traffic flow, and thus they moved in random, illogical ways — striding across the

center of the road, casually winding in and out from the side, standing and chatting where they were... Scenes like this were everywhere. The bigger cargo wagons and carts were slowed to a crawl by these chaotic conditions.

It would seem that everyone in the HMT — Itami included — was used to situations like these, and they all bore expressions of resignation. They yawned and had looks like “Let’s push forward a little” written on their faces. However at this time, there was no point in tapping their feet in annoyance. Itami, who was trying to get used to the local atmosphere, grumbled, “Ah, what bad luck, we came in at rush hour,” and then he shifted his feelings to a pattern which better suited waiting out a traffic jam.

“It’s always like this here. It’s neither planned nor logical.”

Lelei said these words, at once wistful and resigned, from the driver’s seat as she slowly drove the HMT on.

In front of the HMT was a wagon laden with vegetables which looked like pumpkins.

Its driver was an old man. In the back was a male Halfling and a young cat-eared girl, who sat together in a very familiar way, leaning their backs on each other. It was a scene which made people want to smile, and Itami

wondered if that Halfling adult and that young cat-eared girl were a couple as he stared at them without realizing it. Just then, the eyes of both sides met, and Itami smiled in order to cover up his embarrassment.

Perhaps she had been affected by the air of impatience and anxiety in the vehicle, but Lelei put forward a suggestion to everyone.

“After turning right at the junction ahead, there’ll be a large inn not too far ahead. If you really can’t wait any longer, you can go ahead and take a look.

However, Tuka disliked the bustle and clamor of the streets. She rejected the idea by saying “We’ll get lost if we walk around in strange areas,” and punctuated her statement by taking out her musical instrument. Meanwhile, Rory’s face read “I’m so glad we won’t have to be stuck here”. After saying, “Got it, I’ll be heading over first”, she dismounted and asked Yao to join her.

“That’s a big help.”

“I know. Let me pick the inn for us.”

And so, Rory and Yao stepped forward excitedly, soon vanishing into the crowds.

“Has she been here before?” Itami muttered.

Tuka agreed and said, “It’s definitely not her first time” while scooping up her lute.

“Speaking of which, what should I play next?”

“Hm, that’s right. What’s a good piece...”

By the time the HMY had reached the inn, Tuka had played about ten requests for Itami.

Rory chose an inn which was called the Reader’s Rest. This was a four-storey building whose bottom two floors were made of brick while its upper two floors were made of wood. It looked like quite an extraordinary place.

Standing at the inn’s main door, Rory and Yao frantically waved their hands to Itami and the others as they shouted “Over here, over here”, “We’re right here”.

Lelei spotted them from a distance away, and she guided the vehicle over. The inn's valet saw this and frantically ran out. However, as he did this, the hairy Beastman realized that this wagon was apparently not pulled by horses, and he tilted his head in confusion. Then, he respectfully addressed Itami and the others within the vehicle: "You must be Her Holiness' followers. Please follow me." With that, he herded the nearby pedestrians out of the way and guided the car toward the inn. Since the city was a gathering place for many species, one could see many mixed-blooded humanoids everywhere.

"We're Rory's followers? When exactly did I agree to be addressed like that?" Itami grumbled. In response, Lelei answered:

"The inns here are very picky. Usually, you can't stay without someone introducing you. What she did was quite appropriate."

"It sounds like an old restaurant in Tokyo. Still, that means that all we need to do is mention Rory to get rid of all the problems in our way, right?"

"Indeed. The residents are just as old-fashioned as this city, and they bow easily to fame and power."

“Mm, after all, it seems that the gods are the highest authority in this world.”

They looked toward the inn’s parking area, where stagecoaches and cargo wagons were neatly lined up in a row.

Inside the stables, they could see horses for pulling wagons and geldings used for riding. They were all helping themselves to fodder. Further within were creatures which looked like dinosaurs. At a glance one might think the inn was preparing to set up a branch of Jurassic Park.

“The roofed garage is here..”

The Beastman guided Itami and the others to the garage for roofed wagons in a natural tone, without bothering to explain the details to them.

According to Lelei, inns like these usually had two places for parking — the open-air parking lot, and the roofed garage, which had locked doors and a roof. Although using the locked garage was more expensive, it was a worthwhile expense for merchants transporting large quantities of cargo. In contrast, the open-air parking lot was free of charge, but if one parked a goods wagon there, they risked

thieves making off with their cargo, and of course there was the inconvenience of being exposed to the elements.

It was troublesome to move the HMV's weapons, ammunition and other equipment to their room, so to Itami, rejoiced at the fact that they had an enclosed area to park the vehicle.

After everyone had dismounted, Itami hastily retrieved his toiletries and other daily-use supplies as well as his sidearm. Then he closed the garage's door with his hands full.

After that, Lelei, Tuka, as well as Rory — who had popped in from behind them — began knocking on and fiddling with the garage's door and lock.

“What are they doing?” Itami mused. The valet, who had been standing to the side all this while, quietly replied:

“That's a many-layered ward. Magic, spirit magic, as well as Her Holiness' curse... any idiot who touches those will die a horrible death. Even if they survive by some miracle, they'll probably wish they were dead. Ohhhhh, it scares me just to think of it.”

After realizing that they were probably setting up anti-theft measures, Itami vowed not to come near this place again.

“Welcome, your Holiness Rory, as well as her followers. I am the owner of the Reader’s Rest, Hamal. It is my honor to personally serve your Holiness during your stay here. This is no idle boast, but even in the ancient city of Londel, the Reader’s Rest can be considered one of the most aged of our many historic institutions. And now, thanks to the patronage of your Holiness, this humble establishment can tally another mark of honor upon its long and distinguished history.”

The innkeeper Hamal was clearly not human at first glance — not only was he huge of body, his skin seemed to be red in color. Once he asked around, Itami learned that he was a Pooka, a species which was adept at commerce.

Separated from them by a counter, the innkeeper handed a guest register to Rory. At the same time, a palm-size Fairy descended beside the book, quickly producing a pen for them.

Rory accepted the pen with a “Thank you”, and then signed her name with grand, sweeping strokes.

The innkeeper beamed with satisfaction as he read out Rory's name.

"Rory Mercury... as expected your Holiness' calligraphy is impeccable. This is no idle boast, but this register contains the signature of Tyrant King Solmon of Kracia."

"Ah, what a nostalgic name. In those days, I was just a trainee priestess. Did that person stay here as well?"

"Indeed. King Solmon spent his youth in this city of Londel. Of course, your Holiness' name will also become a point of pride for our household, and it will be passed down through the generations."

After Rory signed her name, Lelei took up the pen and signed for the other four. However, during this time, the innkeeper continued speaking only to Rory.

"Your Holiness, may I ask why you have come to this place?"

Everyone knew that Londel was a city of learning and knowledge, so all the shrines here were dedicated to gods of wisdom, knowledge and so on, like the God of Wisdom

Elranyala. In turn, it was practically unheard of to have an Apostle of Emroy visit this place.

“Actually, I came to accompany this girl.”

As Rory spoke, she gestured with her eyes to the innkeeper. Only then did he seem to realize that Lelei existed, and he muttered “The Rurudo girl?” He eyed her from her silver hair to the tips of her toes, as though he were licking her body with his gaze. Apparently, the Rurudo were a very rare breed of humans, living a nomadic lifestyle with no fixed home.

“A sage’s robe... I see, is she a freshly-admitted apprentice?”

Simply put, the “admission” Hamal was talking about referred to signing on with a master to learn his craft. All who wanted to walk the path of academia needed to start by learning basic knowledge from the sages in their homes. After that, outstanding apprentices would journey to Londel to seek ever more esoteric knowledge. Even so, things like schools or organized educational institutions did not exist in this City of Wisdom. In their place, the apprentices sought out teachers in the city and begged to be allowed to study under them. Most of the apprentices who came here to learn their art were around Lelei’s age. Therefore, the

innkeeper came to the conclusion that Lelei was a “freshly-admitted apprentice”.

Rory understood the innkeeper’s thoughts, and she simply smiled without saying anything.

“Welcome to Londel. I will arrange for your rooms, which will be the best in the house, of course. I pray your Holiness and her followers will wait here for a few moments.”

The innkeeper blew his whistle, summoning the boys who did odd jobs around the inn. Soon enough, Brownies, Pookas, Hobbits, and youths of various species filled the room.

“Add another bed to Room 2 on the fourth floor. Tidy up Room 3 on the other side as well. Hurry!”

“Yes, Hamal-san!”

Several of the servants dashed out after receiving instructions to add another mattress to the three-person room.

Others, who did not have anything in hand, encircled the group while saying, “Let us help you take your luggage.”

“Uwah, this girl’s really cute!”

“She’s beautiful. Look, her golden hair’s so pretty!”

“You lot! That’s a guest! Don’t be rude to them!”

“Your Holiness. Please allow me to take your halberd.”

One of the servants took the halberd from Rory, and then he began to yelp “Uwaaaaah!” as he felt its weight. At the same time, he lost balance in shock, and fell to one side.

The halberd fell toward the crotch of another servant, who shrieked “Aieeee!” and leapt away before falling flat on his ass. Then, the sharp halberd embedded itself into the wooden floor with hardly a sound.

“Oi, you lot! What the hell are you doing?!”

“Sorry, Hamal-san. But... it’s really heavy... Please, please follow us, your room’s on the fourth floor.”

“One, two, three!”

The halberd was finally moved by the combined strength of three people, who then proceeded to carry it up the stairs.

Rory shrugged and said, “Good grief,” as she saw them struggling, before walking up the stairs.

Lelei, Tuka and Yao handed their luggage to the inn’s servants, and they proceeded up the stairs empty-handed. In the end, only Itami was left where he was, still holding his luggage.

“Ah... what about me?”

Itami was a little depressed and at a loss for words, given that nobody had spoken to him or offered to take his things. “I haven’t been forgotten, right?” “I’m still a guest, right...?”

Those grumbled words made it to the innkeeper’s ears.

Hamal turned his gaze on Itami and said:

“Ah, that’s right. A minion like you can stay in Room 3, the one opposite the others. I’ve been thinking about it, and although it’s just a storage room, it’s probably still best for a minion to be nearby when he’s called on. Don’t you think

so? You should be thanking me. Fei! Show him the way there!”

Itami blinked, and he saw a Fairy girl, so small that she could stand on his palm, hovering in mid-air.

She made a “come with me” gesture to Itami.

“Thank, thanks.”

Someone like her could not possibly help him carry his luggage...

As Itami muttered “Room 3” to himself, he slowly trudged up the stairs.

On the other hand, Hamal — the only one remaining downstairs — looked at the names on the guest register, and he began thinking: “Who’s this Lelei girl?” and “What does she have to do with an Apostle of Emroy, anyway?”

Anyone who ran an inn needed a keen pair of eyes for scrutinizing people. Foolishly allowing people of unknown

provenance to stay at one's inn might lead to them welching on their bills, or worse, stealing.

The Reader's Rest had been in business for a thousand years, and it kept its own traditions. Every generation of its proprietors kept an eye on any guests who came in, and they were instantly aware of anything funny they got up to. It was through this practice that the inn had gotten its reputation for reliability, and it was why their big customers had flocked to them. It was for this reason that Innkeeper Hamal did a background check on every customer who stayed here, though recently, his actions had gone beyond the line of simple "alertness". His mind churned and spun with all sorts of imagined scenarios — they had become a hobby of his.

"Lelei La Lele... huh."

To most people, the sage's robe Lelei wore looked very plain. However, Hamal was very perceptive. He had immediately deduced that her clothes and their stitching were well made and valuable. Still, it was hard to imagine that a wandering Rurudo girl would be able to be that extravagant. Thus, Rurudo decided to flex his imagination, and drafted a colorful script for her.

—For instance, might that girl have caught the eye of a wealthy noble, and become an adopted daughter?

—If people spoke highly of her, then there must have been some wealthy old tycoon or noble who handed the family business and his powers to his son, and decided to find meaning in his twilight years through teaching. After searching all over, he found a talented girl, and decided to raise her — probably into a wife for his grandchildren, perhaps, and he took pains to properly educate her.

—On the other hand, if there was malicious gossip about her, then she would be a young (child?) concubine, and not an adopted daughter. If that girl really was in such a situation, there might be people who would sympathize with or resent her — perhaps after marrying his latest conquest, the lecherous old man might have died of a heart attack or some other reason. After that, his sons would be frustrated — how would they deal with this (child?) concubine who was most likely younger than them? The most reasonable conclusion was that she would be exiled from the household, but in exchange she would be allowed to live a life of freedom. In addition, she would be sent to Londel with a generous allowance.

If that sequence of events was accurate, then he would be justified in predicting that her Holiness would have taken pity on the poor girl and escorted her here.

“Tuka Luna Marceau and Yao Ro Ducey.”

It was worth thinking about this Elf and Dark Elf pair as well. After all Elves and Dark Elves had never gotten along. Yet, the two of them were travelling together, so the reason for that ought to be interesting.

“Itamy Youjy... well, he’s just a baggage-carrying minion, no point thinking about him.”

His clothes were an uneven mix of dark and bright green and covered in brown stripes that seemed to be randomly thrown in. Surely they were some form of jester’s motley.

After a while, the sound of footsteps came down the stairs, and the servants who had ushered the guests to their rooms came down the stairs.

Hamal shouted at them: “Keep quiet when you walk!” and then quietly whispered: “How was it?”

In other words, how generous were the guests?

One could determine a guest's affluence by the tips they gave to the help.

One of them answered, "They tipped in Molt coppers", and showed the money in his hands to Hamal.

"Oh, really? Did each of you get them?"

"Each of us got one."

A sizable portion of the people who chose to stay in the Reader's Rest were from the wealthy class of society. Even so, most of the time they only tipped a few slim Bitá coppers each, which they took to be a fact of working life. However, anyone who could give away thick and heavy Mort coppers as tips must have been quite generous. Thanks to these tips, the servants were all talking about those female guests."

"That silver-haired girl with blue eyes is really cute!"

"I think that blonde Elf girl is better."

"Oi oi, she's an Elf, so she's probably pretty old."

“If that’s the case, who do you prefer?”

“Her Holiness, of course.”

“Isn’t she even older?!”

And so, the servants went back and forth, which led to a lively discussion.

Hamal personally felt that the Dark Elf girl was most his type. Under these circumstances, her actual age was not a problem. The most important thing was the mature woman’s sex appeal that she possessed. *They’re boys, which is why they can’t appreciate her charms,* Hamal thought as he looked smugly at the serving boys.

“Oh, we have customers again. There’s work to do, you lot, so step lively!”

Hamal clapped his hands, and the inn servants chorused “Yes sir” before rushing off to their work.

After that, guests who wanted to stay filtered in. Today’s occupancy rate was quite good. Most of them seemed to be

book traders who frequently visited this place, or parents who were sending their children here to find a master. Hamal politely welcomed them all, and bade them sign the guest register, then had the servants lead the guests to their rooms. He repeated these familiar tasks by rote, intimately familiar with each and every step of the process.

There were also some travelling merchants who had turned back from their journey to the Imperial Capital.

Once he asked, he discovered that a critical bridge leading to the Capital had collapsed, and now fording the river was a problem.

There had been no news of the river flooding, so nobody could have expected something like this to happen. Upon closer listening, he heard people say things along the lines of “Looks like someone sabotaged it on purpose”.

“But would anyone gain from that?” Hamal asked. His guests replied, “There might be certain traders moving product to the Imperial Capital. They might want to jack up the prices and in order to cause rumors of the destruction to spread, they would do such a thing.”

And so, the travelling merchants came to the inn one by one, though they tapered off after Hamal had taken quite a

few of them in. Then, the sound of footsteps came from the staircase.

Hamal turned to look, and saw that Rory and her companions were descending the stairs. As he saw this, he deeply realized something — that truth could sometimes be more vivid than fiction. Judging by the sizeable tips the servants had received, the “perverted old gramps and his (child?) concubine” plot might actually be quite plausible.

“We’ll be heading outside for a while. We’ll have dinner outside, so there’s no need to prepare it for us.”

So spoke the man that Hamal thought was their minion. He had changed out that colorfully striped jester’s outfit of his for another set of clothes which certainly seemed foreign enough, but looked quite stylish. What the innkeeper did not know was that Itami was now wearing the JGSDF dress uniform. At the same time, Lelei, Rory, Tuka and Yao were in a circle around him. One could say that it perfectly illustrated how he lay at the heart of the relationships between the five of them.

And then, Hamal saw something he had not expected — the girl that he had taken for a newly-minted acolyte wore a pure white robe, with a white braid stretching from shoulder to shoulders and hanging down her chest. In her

hand she held a magic staff which symbolized the Linton School.

Anyone who lived within Linton knew what these vestments represented. Because of that, if she were to walk on the main roads, anyone who saw it would immediately clear a path for her.

“This, this is quite a surprise. Ah, my eyes must be deceiving me. Do you intend to contend for the title of Sage at such a young age?”

Anyone who wanted to compete in the final trial for the title of Sage would need to dress like this. It was practically a tradition.

The Academy City of Linton periodically conducted academic conferences. There the robes of those candidates whose abilities were acknowledged by their peers would remain pristine white. In contrast, those who could not convince the gathered masters of their skills would be mercilessly pelted with jars of jet-black ink. Of course, the state of the blackened robe could hardly bear watching. In addition, the failed candidate was not allowed to change out of that stained, blackened robe until they left Linton, so they would have to endure the shame of the condemning

eyes of all around them. Because of that, anyone who met such a fate typically fled the city after calming down.

When contending for the title of Sage, a key part of the process involved presenting a thesis. According to the rules, one needed enough evidence and experience for the subject matter of the thesis that even the most ancient professor would nod in deference.

When presenting one's thesis, it was common for someone in the audience to level weaselly arguments at the candidate in cutting tones, which would be followed by mocking laughter from all sides. This often caused the author to panic and rush through their presentation, only to find that they had tripped over their own tongue halfway, or submitted the wrong manuscript, or messed up and accidentally cast a spell during the presentation, and some had even fled the conference in tears. In any event, it was a terribly cruel set of proceedings.

Of course, even if one failed during this ordeal, they would not die. Anyone who could endure the shame of being mocked by the audience could challenge them as often as they liked. However, anyone who could repeatedly do so in the face of multiple defeats either had no sense of shame or was simply thick-skinned. Hamal felt that describing the girl before him as thick-skinned or oblivious would be a

terrible mistake. *Waiflike, maybe. As delicate as fine porcelain. If you handled her too roughly, she might break, no?*

That was what Hamal thought.

In addition, he had no idea who her master was. To think he would actually allow her to make such a rash attempt! As he thought about this, Hamal hastily asked:

“Forgive my intrusion, but may I ask the identity of your honored master?”

“Kato. Kato El Ardestan.”

The innkeeper knew of this name. To be precise, everyone in the Academy City of Londel knew this name. “It would be strange if someone didn’t know him” — so famous was that name’s owner.

The Old Sage Kato. A man who was a magician among magicians.

So that was it, she was that man’s disciple.

Hamal's jaw dropped, and he could not say anything. After this startling revelation, he saw the girl before him with new eyes.

Lelei led Itami and the rest of the gang away from the inn. After travelling a short distance, they came across row upon row of buildings in what looked to be a residential district. Because they were now halfway up a mountain's slopes, they had an unobstructed view of the sprawling streets at the mountain's base.

"That building is called a meeting hall, used for convening conferences and sharing academic results. And that over there is the city hall. Sovereign city-states usually have a small council."

After that, Lelei turned and pointed to the mountain's peak.

"And then, from this point on is the research district."

The area she was pointing to was encircled by high walls.

The brick walls seemed to be protecting something. Aside from the great gates, there seemed to be an air around the

place which was hostile to outsiders. It would be quite accurate to describe it as the wall surrounding a huge mansion.

However, on closer inspection one would find that there were no guards on patrol, nor was the area restricted in any way. Anyone could pass the wall and reach the other side. There, all the buildings were old and dilapidated, looking as if they would collapse under their own weight at any moment. Because of that, Itami and company nearly assumed that this was the pauper's district. Although they were only separated by a single wall, the buildings on the outside were still quite presentable, despite their plainness. However, this place was the heart of the Academy City Londel. If this place were a university, then this would be the equivalent of their main campus.

The young men and women nearby were dressed similarly to Lelei. Their clothes were immaculate, without so much as a hint of dust, dirt or grime on them. It would seem all of them had spent long years as apprentices. When Lelei appeared from behind, most of them looked on with wide eyes. After that, some pretended that they had not seen anything, while others did spit-takes, and then they scattered like birds. A keen-eyed observer would be able to discern the dark and complex emotions within them.

“Lelei, if you can really become a Sage at this age, you’ll probably raise up a storm of jealousy around you.”

Lelei kept her eyes fixed straight ahead after hearing Rory’s words, and she nodded emotionlessly.

“I am prepared for that.”

Lelei was determined to contend for the title of Sage.

She had been allowed to do this because Master Kato had already acknowledged her ability — had felt that she was skilled enough to contend for that title. On the other hand, people had spent five, sometimes ten years in research and study, but their efforts were fruitless. There were quite a few people like that in the Academy City of Londel. As these people toiled in obscurity, it was only natural that they would feel jealous when they saw someone as young as Lelei achieve the goal which had eluded them for so long.

If one looked around, one would see several young people in dirty robes, engaged in an intense debate of some sort, while writing something on the ground in large characters. Looking further, one could see a group of students surrounding the Dwarves, who seemed to be tutors delivering a lecture.

Itami could tell that this was equivalent to a university's research department. However, unlike Japanese universities, the professors and students here were not limited to fixed locations, but they could turn even the shade of the trees on either side of a road into a makeshift lecture room.

"Could it be that some big names come here to lecture too?"

"Of course. The research facilities of the masters are all isolated, so they have to come by themselves."

An oddly-placed word made its way into Itami's ear, and he could not help but ask, "Isolated?"

Lelei nonchalantly repeated, "Yes, isolated".

As she said that, a flare of light erupted from a building not far ahead. After that, a flood of water erupted from everywhere on that building which could be considered a window. The nearby region was subjected to a miniature flash flood, and those unfortunate apprentices who had been passing by were soaked to the bone.

“What the hell just happened! My equation! My precious equation, I only just finished formulating it!”

“My, my samples are ruined!”

“My thesis! My thesis! Ahhhhhh— it’s all wet now!”

All around them were people beating their chests, stomping their feet, wailing and gnashing their teeth. It looked like the site of a terrible disaster.

Looking around, it would seem even Yao had not been spared this fate. Thanks to a splashing wave from the flood, she was now dripping water everywhere.

Fortunately, Yao had shielded Lelei with her body, and Lelei had not been touched by even a droplet of water. She quickened her pace to avoid the streams of water beneath her, and with each step she repeated what she had just said.

“Isolated.”

Itami thought about his uniform, which had been caught in the spray, and mused on what Lelei had just said.

“I see.”

“Could it be that the wall was made to separate the districts for this reason? So... could it be that Master Kato was living in Coda Village as a form of isolation as well?”

“...If something like that happened there, it would be very dangerous.”

“Wouldn’t the villagers of Coda get involved too?”, “Would it be safe like that?” and other questions kept streaming forth. *That’s true, which is why Master Kato’s hut was located some distance away from the rest of the village,* Itami thought. If that were the case, a lot of the questions they had when they went to inspect the damage to the village could be easily explained.

“This way.”

They followed Lelei into a narrow alley, which seemed to link to other narrow alleys, creating an environment where people might get lost and go astray easily. Before long, the group stopped before a small building. They opened an unimposing gate and climbed a narrow and treacherous staircase, the sort which looked like it would hardly bear someone brushing up against it. Every time they put their

way on it, the stairs creaked loudly, making people think that they would collapse at any moment. After taking that into consideration, Itami and the others had to proceed slowly and carefully as they ascended. Almost immediately, a small wooden door came into view.

There was only enough room at the top of the stairs to accommodate Lelei and Tuka. Rory, Yao and Itami had to wait in the middle of the staircase. After that, Lelei rapped on the door, using her staff in lieu of a door knocker.

“Who is it? If you’re here to collect debts, you can save your effort. I’m broke.”

A grumbling, questioning voice answered the repeated knocking. Judging by the hoarseness of the voice, one could imagine that it belonged to an older woman.

“I’m Lelei.”

The door swung open the moment she stated her name.

From it came a cute-looking old lady (human) who seemed to be in her late 70s.

Judging by her looks, she must have been beautiful 50 years ago, Her grey hair was streaked with black and white, tied up in a bun and secured with a hairpin. Her back was straight and there seemed to be a sparkle in her eyes, from which one could tell that this old lady had lived a full and meaningful life. The look in her eyes seemed to summarize her attitude towards life.

Naturally, she wore a Sage's robe, though hers was somewhat old.

"Well! Well well well! Is that you, Lili?"

"No. It's Lelei."

The old lady lightly swatted herself on the head with her right hand.

"Yes, that's right, it should be Lelei. Although, Lili sounds quite cute too," she said as she rubbed Lelei's head.

Once the two of them drew near to each other, the others discovered that this old lady was about the same height as Lelei.

“Thank you for coming all the way here to visit me. All right, all right, don’t all cluster up around the door. Sadly I don’t have anything for guests, but please come in anyway.”

After being invited into the old lady’s home, they looked around, and found that it was filled with parchments and books, as well as numerous specimen cases.

All the walls were covered in bookshelves. The tables were all covered in mountainous piles of books, and the floor around them was strewn with scrolls or notebooks that had fallen from the countless piles of books. There hardly seemed to be any space to move around in the house. Itami and the others unconsciously squeezed themselves into what few gaps they could find, while Rory stood right behind Itami, as though trying to hide herself.

The old lady noticed Lelei’s garb, and asked:

“Judging by the way you’re dressed, it seems you’re competing for the title of Sage, right? But don’t you think it’s a little early for that? Has that old rogue Kato finally gone senile?”

In response, Lelei produced a letter written on parchment, and gave it to the old lady.

She cracked the wax seal open and muttered, "Let me see what's in here" and began reading the letter.

"Hmhm, I see. Ara ara, is that so..."

The more she read, the more exaggerated her reaction became.

Before long, she finished the letter. Then, she quietly looked back at Lelei, her eyes filled with delight.

"I didn't think you'd be able to accomplish so much. If that's the case, it makes sense you'd skip grades. Kato painted you with glowing words. If Arpeggio learned about this, she'd be jealous."

"How's Alfie?"

"Same old, same old. She seems to have gone out for something. She should be back in a while. ...Ara ara, this isn't good, I can't leave my guests standing as they wait. Lili, could you give me a hand? I need to get some chairs for them..."

“My name is Lelei.”

The two of them went back and forth at each other as they searched for suitable chairs in the room. However, no matter where they looked, everything that could have something placed on it — be they tables or chairs — was occupied by books. Then, just as the old lady was about to reach out to push away a specimen case, a pile of books on a nearby table tumbled like an avalanche, and in a chain reaction the specimen box also fell. The rocks within the protective case — probably gemstones or ores of some kind — spilled out over the ground.

“Ah! Sensei, what are you doing! Didn’t I ask you not to make the house messier than before?!”

Just then, a cry of complaint came from outside the door.

A woman with brown hair placed her shopping basket on the ground — to be precise, she hurled it to the ground — and stormed in, muttering “Really!” as she did. Once she entered, she radiated an aura that made even the old lady and Lelei back off, and then she began to pick up the stones on the ground.”

“What’s wrong? You seem particularly grouchy today, are you constipated?”

“What, what are you saying, it’s nothing like that!”

This woman had a head of slightly-curled brown hair, which she sloppily tied up with a cloth ribbon.

In addition, there was no sign of makeup on her face. The fact that she — as a woman — looked so slovenly and unkempt might make people feel that she had cast away any attempt at trying to look attractive or feminine.

However, in stark contrast to her dressing, her body was curved and well proportioned, and her sensual body lines were visible even through her clothing, to the point where people dared not to look at her directly.

“Mm... this piece goes in this box, that pieces goes in the other box. One, two, three... eh, where’s that rutil gone?”

It would seem that this woman and the granny both lacked talent in cleaning and tidying, to nearly fatal levels.

“Ara, you mean this?”

Just as the old lady reached out to the table, the painstakingly rearranged specimen cases fell to the ground again.

Silence filled the room.

The brown-haired woman looked at the old lady. The way her body was trembling suggested that she was desperately trying to control her emotions.

“Sensei, let me make this clear. You’re in the way right now, so could you please step outside for a bit?”

“That, that’s right... well, it’s getting later, so I’ll take our guests to “Marina” for dinner. You should come over too after tidying this up. It’s rare that Lili comes by, and you probably have so much to talk about.”

“Lili? Who are you talking about?”

“No. It should be Lelei.”

“...Got it. I’ll come over once I’m done. Mm, that’s right, of course I need to go over right away. I can’t wait to talk to my little sister — the little sister who’s now planning to skip the rank of Doctor and jump over her big sister’s head to

contend for the title of a Sage, the little sister who ignored the feelings of her lonely big sister who has no luck with men, the little sister who wears earrings because she wants to look more attractive, the little sister who looks down on her poor elder sister while being well-to-do herself, the little sister who even brought Elves back with her — oh yes, I'd love to talk to her, about all sorts of things."

Just as this woman was talking, Itami noticed something rare from his place by the side.

A bead of sweat slid down Lelei's forehead, and then lingered on her cheek...

After passing through the wall around the research district, they walked a little further before reaching the restaurant called "Marina".

There were three plainly-made tables within and a counter.

There were two or three female patrons who looked to be acolytes. They were keenly focused on studying the books in their hands, and one of them was recording nonstop.

The air in here was like a cafe near a ladies' college. Since places like this were a family business, they were decorated cosily, which made them popular with women.

“Lady Mimoza, welcome. My, you have many people with you today. Are they all your students?”

A red-faced man who looked like the owner welcomed the old lady with a bright smile.

“No, no, they're all my guests. Come, look, they're all pretty girls. How about it, do you like them?”

“Indeed, they're all very pretty. Looks like I'd better give it my best shot today.”

With that, he energetically headed back into the kitchen.

Mimoza smiled in satisfaction as she watched him, then picked a table and called the others over.

“Come, come, please take a seat, everyone. The food here is pretty good, and since the customers are all cute girls, it should get even better. The most important thing is — it's cheap.”

After thinking a little, Itami pushed two four-man tables together and arrayed chairs around them before sitting down. Then he began searching for the menu.

“I wonder what sort of food this restaurant serves?”

“Just leave it to the owner, I guess.”

And so, after they had sat down and caught their breath, Mimoza suggested that Lelei introduce both sides, in order to make good use of the time until the food arrived.

“This is Mimoza La Mel. She is a magician and a Great Sage, as well as one of the elders of Londel City.”

According to Lelei’s introduction, this old lady was Master Kato’s senior, under the same master. Lelei’s big sister Arpeggio was currently learning from her. She also added “she’s highly versed in matters of archeology” — that seemed directed to Itami — and she nonchalantly hinted, “Sensei Mimoza would probably be vital for the resource prospecting mission.”

After that, it was Itami and gang’s turn.

Lelei introduced them in the order they were seated, from the furthest to the nearest.

After Mimoza heard the introductions of the two Elves, her eyes sparkled and she said:

“Well, seeing Elves and Dark Elves sitting peaceably at the same table is something new. What happened to make them get along so well? If it’s possible, could you tell me about it?”

As she finished saying this, Tuka and Yao exchanged looks and smiled uncomfortably. Neither of them had expected anyone to say that they were “getting along well”.

The truth was, it was hard to say they got along, even in the broadest of terms. The two of them had complex feelings about each other... for instance, Yao had done something terrible to Tuka in order to save her people, and until now she was still consumed by guilt over her deeds. When Tuka regained her senses, she was grateful to Yao to some extent, but at the same time she could not deny that what Yao had done was truly evil.

Even so, neither of them hated each other. Thus, the fact that the two of them could calmly sit down at the same table was nothing to be worried about. In any case, after

everything that had happened, they were just uneasy about being with each other.

After that, just as Lelei was about to introduce Rory—

“It’s been a while, Rory. Could it be that you came to find the answer to that question?”

Mimoza interrupted Lelei, indicating that there was no need to introduce Rory.

“It was 50 years ago, when Rory and I were travelling around.”

“Mimoza, you’ve grown old.”

“I have indeed. Are you jealous? I’m the very picture of a granny now.”

As she said that, the old lady raised her wrinkled hands. She seemed to be showing off a pair of prized treasures. Rory seemed envious herself, even pouting as she saw it.

“Then, Lili... no, no, it’s Lelei. How about introducing the next one?”

Lelei glanced at Itami sitting beside her.

“This gentleman is Itamy Youjy.”

Lelei did not say anything other than his name.

“Oh? Itamy Youjy... it’s pronounced like that, right?”

“Pleased to meet you.”

Itami rose and bowed politely, then filled in for Lelei — that his surname was “Itami”, his given name was “Youji”, and then continued:

“I’ve heard that you are well-versed in archeology, MIMOZA-sensei. Therefore, I would like to ask; are there any useful resources or ores in the area? Do you know of anything like that?”

“Mmm, I can say I know a few. Of course, that depends on your definition of ‘useful’.”

“Wonderful. If it’s at all possible, I would like you to tell me.”

“Mm, I don’t mind you asking. However, shall we discuss that later? Right now, I just want to chat happily with all of you. What do you think?”

“It’s fine. Until Lelei’s done with her conference, I’ll be around. I can visit you any time you’re free.”

After receiving Mimoza’s approval, Itami bowed politely in thanks. Etiquette of this sort came naturally to Itami once he stepped into society. At this time, Mimoza eyed the fabric of his green uniform and asked:

“These clothes are quite rare. Which country do you hail from?”

“I come from Japan, from the other side of the Gate at Arnus Hill.”

“Ah! Well ,that’s interesting. I’ve heard that a Gate opened at Arnus, but there’s been no news about what’s on the other side of the Gate. Now, tell me, what’s that place like? Lelei, have you been there?”

“We’ve already been there,” Rory said with a smug look on her face. Mimoza leaned forward eagerly.

“Ah, I’m envious. Come, tell me about your trip!”

Lelei, Rory and Tuka looked at each other in response to Mimoza’s request. After exchanging looks for a while, they each began relating their own account of events — Rory talked about the sights on the streets, Tuka described the luxurious clothing that she had seen, while Lelei mentioned several Japanese bookstores she had been to.

“Those stores have an astounding amount of books. Also, according to Pina, there are libraries there, which contain all sorts of books and which are available to the common folk. If I get a chance to go there again, I’ll definitely go take a look. I feel we should build one in Londel as well.

As Itami listened to them speak, a question popped up in his mind, and so he asked:

“Could it be that you don’t have libraries? Here, in this Academy City?”

“Not here, no.”

“According to records in ancient books, there had once been facilities like that, but in the end, they were no more.”

“That’s a matter for long ago. They used to fight holy wars in this region, and the zealots of a monotheistic religion burned the book storage to ash,” Mimoza said with a sad look on her face.

Part of the reason why the city of Londel was known as the City of Wisdom was because it contained many wise folk, who each possessed impressive book collections. Now that the libraries had vanished, anyone seeking knowledge had no choice but to gather it on their own. Under these conditions, only selfishly hoarding books would sate their thirst for knowledge.

“If it’s really as Lelei says, then that would be great. However, collecting these valuable things presents certain difficulties.”

“It’s fine. The printing press makes book production easy. In the land of Nihon, publishing books is commonplace to the people there. As a result, they have large gatherings called Dou-Jin-Shi Mar-Kets where such materials are regularly released to the people. Every time this release takes place, countless people gather there. It is a majestic sight.”

Lelei had a rare look of excitement on her face as she said this.

“It would be great if books were cheap enough to be easily accessible to people.”

“That dream will come true one day.”

Lelei looked to the sky and nodded, as though she had predicted the future. But just then...

“That’s bad!”

There was a great crash, as though someone had hit the door with all their strength. Everyone slowly turned to look at the source of the sound.

“Wait, wait a bit, that would be bad. Very bad. There’s people who would be inconvenienced by the price of books going down.”

Just then, Lelei’s elder sister Arpeggio El Lelena appeared at the door. She had a spine-chilling expression — like she was wearing a hannya mask — on her face.



Chapter 3

It was sunset.

Every day, around this time, lessons ended and the students would return to their dwellings.

At the same time, the city's residents would slowly began rousing themselves, as though to fulfil some silent pact with the students. To merchants, evening was when business picked up, and one could hear people shouting "We're opening for business!"

To the housewives, the most important thing for them when evening came was to rush home so they could prepare dinner for their husbands and children, so they frequently appeared *en masse* on the streets whenever the time came.

The pedestrians on the streets milled about here and there, far exceeding the density of the morning crowd. The entire city was a scene of extraordinary liveliness.

Several robed students flashed through this scenery, pushing aside the people blocking them as they swiftly darted through the crowd. While they ran, they strained their voices and shouted what they had just seen, as though conducting some form of public service.

"It's a fight! It's a fight! Two mages are going to fight!"

"And they're both girls!"

“And one of them is that genius girl Arpeggio!”

“What!? You mean Iron Alfie’?”

It would seem this fight involved someone who was quite famous in this city.

“Who’s her opponent?”

“She’s a human girl called Lelei. Seems to be fourteen, fifteen, maybe.”

“Never heard of her. Then, where are they fighting?”

“Just in front of ‘Marina’. Hurry!”

Once they heard this, quite a few people sprang into action and ran at top speed. They sprinted through the streets like a stampede of mad bulls, and the number of people joining them increased quickly as they moved on.

“Well then, apprentice knight Gray. Did you hear that?”

“Indeed I did, Shandy-dono. They’re somewhere near a restaurant called ‘Marina’. Although, there’s no need to search around; we just need to follow wherever the crowd is heading.”

“However, that would waste time, and the more we dawdle, the more dangerous the situation could become. Our hidden enemy must surely be around here somewhere.”

“You have that right. Anything which your servant could hear could not possibly escape the enemy's notice.”

The two knights who were dressed as travellers nodded and spoke as they walked down the streets, following the crowd of students who were rushing toward their destination.

And so, the street which had become an impromptu battlefield filled up with curious students in the blink of an eye. This resulted in a complete lack of customers for ‘Marina’, at a time when it should have been busiest. The fact was, this spat was causing the owner a lot of problems. On the other hand, his salesman soul was undaunted by this difficulty — instead, he decided to try his luck selling snacks to the audience, so they could watch and eat at the same time. In the end, not only did he not run a loss, but he actually made more than he would have through normal business.

The people who were here to watch the commotion were laying bets on one hand and eagerly waiting for the fight to begin on the other.

Arpeggio El Lelena thumped her magic staff into the ground where she stood, on the eastern side of the road.

Master Kato had once spoken of this 24 year-old woman, saying straight to Lelei's face: "If I had to mount someone, I'd rather mount someone like your big sister — with her perky boobs, slender waist and juicy-fruit butt". Her sensual curves were immediately apparent even through a layer of clothing, and they drew the eyes of every man in the crowd.

On the west side, with her staff in the ground, was Lelei La Lelena.

If this dispute were judged by the maturity of their appearances, then it would be very obvious that this 16 year old (she had celebrated her birthday just recently) would lose. Her scrawny body had only just started rounding out, and it was around this time that her feminine sexual characteristics were starting to develop.

The sisters faced each other, about ten paces apart, when the wind suddenly gusted up, carrying a spray of dust with it.

A bale of straw rolled across the ground as the wind blew. The mood of confrontation — like a showdown in spaghetti western films — intensified further.



Incidentally, this road was not very wide, but it was still enough for two horse-drawn wagons to pass each other going different directions. Therefore, the wagons and pedestrians behind the feuding pair found the road impassable. The two people standing in the middle of the road were basically blocking traffic. Still, perhaps it was because they felt they had front-row tickets to something good, or they had resigned themselves to watch, but there was no frustration on the faces of the bogged-down drivers; only looks of excitement.

Soon enough, there were more people taking bets. A man who looked like a bookmaker shouted, "Three to one odds here!"

It would seem that the mildly famous Arpeggio was favored for victory.

Gambling was quite popular in this City of Wisdom. As for the reason why, one could say that they had no other forms of entertainment. In other words, one could view this as a local custom which also revealed the attitudes of the native people. In a way, life for the common folk here was difficult, but compared to the people of any other nation in any other world, they held their heads high and took everything as it came.

"Is that girl Lelei? I've never seen her before."

The crowd around the pair began a quiet discussion, eager to find out anything about the nameless girl confronting Arpeggio.

“She’s wearing a Sage’s robe, right? How come it’s so dirty?”

“Look at her hair. Someone dumped soup on her head, right?”

Indeed, Lelei’s hair and robe were dyed a deep red by a soup made with fruits and vegetables.

It was made by boiling meat and vegetables for a full day and night, with the marrow-juices adding to the taste as it dissolved into the soup. It produced a thick, rich flavor, which would prove quite difficult to wash out of her clothing. And now, it made a mess of her pure white robes.

“That’s terrible. Who did that?”

“Who else but that genius Arpeggio? At least, that’s what I can see from this.”

“I think Arpeggio got mad and said ‘how could a brat like you try to be a sage’ or something.”

“Uwah, seriously? So this fight’s because of jealousy? Man, that’s so uncool.”

Alfe clicked her tongue as she heard the people whispering things like these around her.

The fact that others had immediately seen through her motives only made her more embarrassed.

Still, what had led to this state of events?

She had given in to her emotions, and so... well, that was a quick summary of it.

“So she was acting up because she was jealous? Well, that must be hard on her.”

Though people quietly jabbed at her like that, it could not be helped. Rather, it did not matter if she stood here either due to stubbornness or pride, because either way, she would not take this lying down. She had to demonstrate the difference between her strength and Lelei's once and for all.

This was why she had to roll up her sleeves and do it.

To the bystanders, it seemed like she had gone too far. Even she herself was not proud of this. However Alfie had her own reasons for taking on Lelei seriously, no matter the cost. Right or wrong, she still had to devote her heart and soul to this reckoning with Lelei.

If she did not do this, if she allowed herself to silently fade away into the flow of time, she would be eternally tormented by her negative emotions, forever looking on her little sister with envious eyes.

If she pretended to be magnanimous and applauded her little sister's accomplishments, perhaps the two of them might be able to get along for a while longer. However, this period of harmony would ring false. From that moment on, everything she did would contradict what she truly felt inside, and there would be an invisible wall of dishonesty between them. In addition, they were not truly related by blood. If a hint of deceit worked its way into their relationship, the two of them would immediately turn on each other. She had to avoid that at all costs.

Therefore, Alfie had chosen this course of action, to challenge Lelei of her own accord, despite knowing that people would mock her as a jealous girl.

That said, how had she gotten to this place?

How... how had her little sister taken one giant step after another, until she had exceeded herself, as the elder sister?

Alfie looked to the side, at the man called Itamy who was watching the battle, and bit her lip.

After tidying up Mimoza's lab. Arpeggio shoved the unused parchments into the satchel she carried with her, locked the door, and then rushed to the restaurant.

Once she reached the restaurant, she edged the door open and poked her head in to chat up the restaurant's owner.

"How are you? Is Mistress here?"

"Lady Mimoza has already arrived with her guests."

After hearing the owner answer in the affirmative, she proudly strode into the restaurant, treading the familiar wooden floors under her feet. Just then, she heard Mimoza and Lelei talking. However, the contents of their conversation made Arpeggio think her heart had stopped.

"It would be great if books were cheap enough to be easily accessible to people."

"That dream will come true one day."

Those words hit her like a bombshell.

So great was her shock that her hand slipped, and the door crashed loudly.

However, that could not be helped. After all, the things Lelei and the others were talking about clearly included some things which distressed Arpeggio.

“Wait, wait a bit, that would be bad. Very bad. There’re people who would be inconvenienced by the price of books going down.”

Alfie inched closer as she spoke. It was as though she was damning Lelei as a corrupt merchant, conspiring to knock the bottom out of the book market.

“Alfie, what are you doing? Stop that at once.”

“Mistress, you should be more aware of these things! Research supplies aren’t free! They cost a lot of money!”

“And here I was wondering what you were so excited about. Is that all?”

“Is that all?! Aren’t you taking this a bit too lightly? The magical grimoires which I worked night and day and spent so much effort to copy out are worth three sinks, no bargaining allowed. If the price of books hits rock bottom, then my four months of work would go down the drain, wouldn’t they? If that really happened, our food, our rent, our living expenses, how would we... ahhhhhhh!”

It certainly seemed quite strange to have a woman grabbing her head in what looked like despair and

suffering. The fact that she was quite pretty as well made it look even more comical. Itami's jaw dropped as he watched Lelei's sister, unable to speak. Nor was he alone — even Tuka, Yao and Rory were hard-pressed to hide their shock.

At this, Mimoza rose to her feet — in order to protect her pupil's reputation, she felt that she had to clarify some of the subtext here.

“I apologize if you were startled. This girl of mine specializes in mineral-based magic. However, branching out this far into the field carries with it certain expenses. Therefore, she has gone to great effort to work part-time as a copyist, but even so, she's not making much. So... when she heard something along the lines of ‘The price of books might go down’, she exhibited this... greatly discomforted behavior.”

Lelei looked like she was going to comfort her big sister. She patted her shoulder and said:

“Don't worry. What I'm talking about won't happen in a couple of days. It'll be in the future.”

“The future?”

“Mm. In the future. Eventually. It will come to pass one day.”

Arpeggio's entire body seemed to go limp, sinking down into a pile on the floor.

Perhaps her antics from just now had fatigued her, but Alfie sighed deeply.

Lelei took all this in, and sensing that her big sister had calmed down, she went to take a glass of water for her.

After a while, when she returned to the dining table with her glass, she found that her place had already been taken by someone else.

“Ah...”

And that someone else was Alfie.

On the right was Mimoza, and to the left was Itami — that was how well-positioned that place was.

Though Lelei's expression remained the same, she stared at Alfie's back, standing still as she did. If she could exert force just by looking at someone, perhaps Mimoza might have been forced away by the pressure of Lelei's glare.

Lelei silently pulled up a chair, slotted it into the only remaining space between Alfie and Mimoza, and then sat down.

Alfie, who had deftly seized the opportunity earlier, did not seem to understand her little sister's feelings. She merely grabbed the cup in Lelei's hand with a "thanks" and downed it in a gulp, which also quelled the heaving of her breast.

"Don't scare me. Really now~"

As though drunk, Alfie suddenly plopped herself on the table and started griping. Everyone's eyes went to her once more.

"Alfie, you've always been so wilful. You've never been patient enough to finish listening to what people say."

"But, you said 'one day'... when will that be?"

"It'll be a while, but not too long."

"I see. I heard that in Valleta, people have been using something called typesetting to print things. So that's why I said it'll come eventually. However, does that mean there's really no future in this sort of thing? What should I do from now on..."

Just as she finished, the man beside her asked, his interest blooming: "Do you mean, authoring books?"

"No, no. Well, there's writing involved, but it's basically just copying the valuable books penned by great sages of the

past. Of course, they have to be bound and illuminated, so the finished tome looks both intricate and informative. After all of that is done, you can take it to the store shelves and sell them.”

“This girl not only has good calligraphy, but she’s good at prettying the volumes up, so her works are quite popular among the wealthy.”

“Ehh~ so that’s what it’s like.”

After Mimoza finished, the man softly murmured in understanding.

Illuminated manuscripts looked good on the shelf, and also hinted at their owners’ generosity, because said owners would have paid a premium to decorate their rooms with such items. Therefore, nobles or wealthy merchants who wanted to pretend that they were cultured were often very happy to buy such exquisitely made volumes.

“Copying an entire book by hand is really difficult, no? My ex-wife also worked in publishing, and she had to face her desk every day. I’m quite surprised that she actually managed to stay sane after all that.”

“Would that lady be a Sage as well?”

“Hell no. She’s a doujin artist... er, how shall I put this. In any case, she drew pictures to tell a story.”

“Oh... so she’s an author of picture books...”

Alfie nervously looked Itami up and down and then asked:

“Then~ though this might be a little intrusive... why did you part ways? Women who stare at desks all day aren’t very attractive, are they?”

“Of course not. She was the one who brought up the subject of divorce. The truth is, I don’t mind women doing that sort of work, so I guess the reason why she wanted to break up was because she wanted to return to the starting point. I guess we just drifted apart somewhere in our lives.”

Itami went “ahaha” as he sheepishly scratched his head.

After that, Alfie put an arm around her little sister’s neck, and gathered her close.

“Who is this man?”

“Itamy Youjy.”

“What does he do?”

“He’s a soldier from the other side of the Gate.”

“So why is a soldier from the other side of the Gate not in the Imperial Capital, but all the way over here?”

Londel had long known of the war between the Empire and the country on the other side of the Gate. However, when one took the location of the Gate at Arnus into consideration, the city of Londel was in the completely opposite direction of the Imperial Capital. There was even a mountain range between the two cities, complete with a mountain stream that flowed from the icy peaks. Because of that, nobody thought that the fighting would come here.

“He’s on a resource-prospecting mission, by order of his country.”

As this conversation reached Mimoza’s ears, the old lady seemed to remember something, and clapped her hands together.

“That’s right! Speaking of which, Itamy-san wants to know something about ores. That’s Alfie’s specialty. Alfie, if you don’t mind, go help him out.”

“Ah, yes. If you don’t mind, I’d be glad to accompany you.”

As she said this, Alfie straightened up in her chair.

Just then, as though waiting for this moment, the restaurant’s owner came in with the food, taking advantage of the brief lull in the conversation. Soon the narrow table

was heaped high with bowls filled with stew and plates laden with food.

“As always, everything looks delicious.”

“Mm. I was pretty motivated today.”

As the owner said this, the ladies in the shop smiled.

And so, it was time to eat. In order to fill the time, Mimoza decided to bring up the “homework”.

“Rory. Before I forget, let me answer the question you gave me last time. You asked me — ‘Why are there so many species in this world?’ And the answer I can give you is — the Gate. The sheer number of demihumans in this world could only have been brought here when the Gate opened and allowed them to pass through. With that in mind, we humans should have been the last immigrants. Historically speaking, humanity would be the youngest residents of this world.”

Mimoza leaned forward, and Rory asked if that was her final answer.

“Mm, I’m pretty sure. It’s for the same reason that Arnus is viewed as a sacred place in the Empire — not for religious reasons, but because it was the place where humanity first flourished.”

“As expected of you, Mimoza.”

Mimoza seemed to have gotten a little excited after winning Rory’s approval — she curled her arms and clenched her fists

“Aah, it looks like the question’s been settled. I feel so relieved. To think, I would discover what it means to be liberated at this age.”

“Why did you ask her that question?”

In response to Itami’s question, Rory gave a serious, earnest reply.

“If you compare this world to a tree, then we as Demigods would be the gardeners who tended to that tree. If we see a branch that has grown too long or grown the wrong way, then we will cut it off, if need be. Of course, the tree called ‘The World’ won’t grow if all we do is trim, am I right? So what we do is pick out some Sages with promise, and pose them a seemingly unreasonable question.”

Even Itami knew that Rory meant knowledge and technology when she talked about branches.

“It sounds like raising a bonsai.”

“Pretty much. You trim the branches you don’t like and get rid of pests that fly in. We have always guarded the peace

of this world through those means — well, we should, but...”

“You should? Why do you say that?”

But just as Itami was about to ask, he saw Rory sigh, and then quietly hiss “Hardy, you idiot.”

Elsewhere, Lelei seemed to have her doubts about what Mimoza had just said.

“I’ve never learned anything like that before.”

Mimoza, on her part, simply shrugged and said, “Well, it’s only to be expected.”

“You see, that’s the direction in which I took my research. Kato focused on physics, so his knowledge of history was only average. It would have been strange if he actually shifted his focus to studying history.”

Right after that, Alfie elbowed her sister in the sides, and the look on her face seemed to say, “As I thought.”

“Didn’t I say it before as well? — Mm, yes, Master Kato is a specialist in combat magic. But learning solely from one old master leads to your knowledge being lopsided. Still, it’s not too late for you. Why don’t you stay here and benefit from a structured education?” Alfie advised.

However, Lelei remained unmoved. She simply said, “If I did not seek Master Kato’s tutelage, I would not have had the chance to contend to be a Sage.”

“That may be so, but that doesn’t matter, right? Here’s some advice for you, that white robe of yours might end up turning all the colors of the rainbow, like a tropical bird — they say that recently, the Elders have been bringing liquid dyes into the conference hall, and you can imagine how that turned out.”

“It’s fine. I have confidence in my research. If possible, I would like you all to see this.”

With that, Lelei withdrew a scroll from a bag which her robe had covered up.

As she did this, several funnels which she had kept inside the bag spilled out. Lelei hurriedly moved to pick them up.

She had bought these copper funnels from a Japanese grocery store. One could use them to fill a container about the size of a wine bottle with liquid from a large beaker (about one liter’s worth of wine, sauce, and so on). Now that bottles were commonplace, funnels like that were quite hard to find.

“Why, why do you have things like these?”

Lelei gave Itami’s question a deadpan answer:

“The shape and materials of these objects are well-suited for producing the Neumann effect. In addition, they are cheap to make, so losing them is not a great loss. The most important thing is that nobody would think of them as weapons.”

Just as the two of them began discussing this, Mimoza and Alfie opened Lelei’s scroll and began reading.

“This packaging looks terribly plain...”

Alfie began by finding fault with the scroll’s exterior. However, by the time she read its contents, she fell silent.

“Well, this is quite surprising. If you directly presented the knowledge from another world as-is, you would definitely be accused of plagiarism. Instead, you used it as a base, and then fused it with our magical systems. If you do this, those picky Elders will have nothing to say.”

Mimoza smiled to Lelei, as though giving a guarantee.

“The coming month’s conference will be quite interesting...”

Alfie said that, but her body had long since frozen up, her brows knotted. Shortly after that, she muttered:

“She, she surpassed me. She completely...”

Arpeggio brought her index fingers together and she rubbed their tips against each other as she kept sighing.

“...Lelei surpassed me.”

“That’s just too bad, Alfie. But you have lots of time, so don’t give up.”

Mimoza’s words were intended to comfort and encourage her. But to Alfie, who had sacrificed so much and devoted her life to research in order to gain results, the shock of being so easily eclipsed by her younger sister was not something that simple encouragement could help with.

“Haa... I might as well not bother with this research business. I don’t have any talent. When will I get a chance to shine? I might as well retire and go back to the village to teach children.”

Alfie was completely depressed.

And now, it was Lelei’s turn to give her encouragement.

“It’s not like that. Obtaining solid results from mineral magic research takes great time and effort — that’s just how research in that field is.”

“R-Really?”

“It was only by the slimmest of chances that I managed to witness the knowledge from the other side of the Gate, and by standing on the shoulders of giants I arrived here. But everyone knows that mineral magic research requires a great sum of money to carry out. Nobody can deny that.”

“That’s what I mean. Without money, I can’t even afford experimental samples... Say, Lelei, you’ve come into a lot of money recently, right? Lend me some!”

Before Alfie could finish, Lelei turned toward the dining table and began spooning up the soup.

“This is really delicious.”

She had completely ignored Alfie’s request.

“Oi! Don’t tell me that you don’t have any money now!?”

“Mineral magic — even if it’s alchemy — is like a witch’s cauldron that melts down every single coin thrown into it. People have literally seen their money go up in smoke. As you can see, this field of research is truly frightening. Anyone who gets involved with that business is asking for it. Because of that, nobody is going to help you.”

“Uwaaaaaaaah!”

As though bemoaning her misfortune, Alfie grabbed her head and wept piteously. As they watched this, Tuka and Rory whispered to each other:

“Lelei’s sister is quite an interesting character.”

“Mm. This is the first time I’ve seen such a passionate human woman.”

From the side, Mimoza merely sighed in exasperation, before joining their conversation:

“That girl threw herself into research ever since she was first able to do so. She’s all wound up, physically and mentally. I guess she’s just been pushed to her limits.”

“Speaking of which — when you were her age, all you did was mess around and have fun, Mimoza.”

Rory began counting on her fingers, for some unknown purpose. Her right hand was not enough, so she carried on to her left hand.

“Rory, could you please not bring up the past?”

It would seem Rory’s actions had managed to turn an old woman’s ears red in embarrassment.

After a while, when she realised that nobody would pay attention to her crying, Alfie suddenly dropped the act and said:

“I’ve had it! I might as well find someone and marry him!”

“Eh? It feels like she changed all of a sudden,” Tuka said.

“What interesting things will she say next?” Rory replied, a look of eagerness on her face.

Alfie put her arm around Lelei again and said:

“Tell me about Itamy-san, hm?”

“Itamy Youjy. A military officer of the country of Nihon. Granted the title of ‘Lord’ by the King of the Elbe Kingdom. In addition, he is an honorary patriarch of the Schwarz Forest Dark Elf tribe, et cetera.”

“A ‘Lord’... well, he’s not a very highly-placed one, but he’s still a noble! How, how about his financial situation? His assets?”

This time, it was Yao who answered.

“Due to certain contributions by Master Itamy, our tribe gave him a diamond which was about this big. In addition, I am also considered Master Itamy’s property.”

Alfie stared at the shape which Yao made with both hands — something about the size of a human head — and fell silent. She rose, radiating a pressure which made Yao feel very uncomfortable, and asked:

“A, a diamond? The size of a human head?!”

At this point, Alfie could not help but let her imagination run wild.

This man possessed enormous wealth, enough for her to build an environment suited for research stocked with all the lab reagents and equipment she could possibly need at a moment’s notice.

They could leave household chores and raising the children to a hired maid (the silhouette of Yao came to mind as she imagined this). Besides, if her husband was a soldier, then he would hardly be at home due to his work. Another thing was that this man had already been divorced, so he was still single.

In other words — he was quite the catch!

Alfie did not care much about anything else as long as she could live comfortably. The sort of lifestyle she wanted was which people described as “As long as my husband brings back the bacon, I don’t mind being left alone at home.” Of course, to a man, a home life like that would basically destroy his hopes and dreams...

By the time Alfie had recovered from these heady delusions of hers and jerked her head back, she found that her seat had already been taken by someone else — Lelei was sitting there nonchalantly, practically leaning up against Itami. It would seem that Lelei had taken advantage of Alfie's standing up to swiftly occupy the void which she left.

"Hey, wait a minute. Lelei, that's my seat."

"It was mine before you got here."

"There's no point saying that now. Give it to me."

"No."

"Why not? Why are you being so difficult?"

After that, Lelei gripped Itami's sleeve tightly and said:

"We already have a three-nights kind of relationship."

The three nights in question (one could call it a ritual, but it was more of a tradition) referred to the fact that a couple which spent three nights sleeping together in the same bed were now joined together. In other words, this was a declaration that "From this day forward, we are married."

"Who... who and who?" Alfie asked in a trembling voice.

"Itamy and I."

“Aieeeee!”

She had been surpassed in academia, beaten in financial power, and now Lelei had even taken the lead in the field of love...

At this moment, the tense string knotted around Alfie’s heart strained even further — and like that, it snapped. By the time she returned to her senses, she had already beamed Lelei on the head with the bowl of soup.

Part of her had considered that it would be bad if Lelei got burned, but once she picked up the bowl, all that went out the window — the soup had grown cold after being left there for so long. That being the case, there was no need to hesitate — Alfie hurled the soup bowl at Lelei’s head.

Her silver hair was now stained reddish-brown by the sweet potato soup. In addition, the dripping soup had reached her shoulders and stained her white clothes.

Everyone was staring in shock at Alfie, while she herself realised what she had done.

Crap, I went too far.

Even so, she did not regret what she had done. Right now, Alfie was feeling more relaxed than she had ever been — indeed, all this was necessary.

At this moment, Lelei rose, somewhat unsteadily. She glared at this big sister of hers, and a fire burned in her eyes.

And this brings us to the events at the beginning of this chapter.

The two female mages stared each other down, like duelists waiting to strike.

The apprentices around them held their breaths, waiting for the battle to start.

No matter how you sliced it, both sides belonged to the Lindon School — one of battle mages. Therefore everyone here could observe the intricacies of magical combat during this battle. If they were lucky, they might even be able to observe spells which were typically reserved as trump cards — something which they all eagerly anticipated.

In the exact center of the distance between the two sisters was Rory in her black priestess' outfit, who slammed the end of her halberd into the ground.

“Koff—. I shall explain the rules which both sides must abide by. First, neither of you will do anything which

endangers the others' lives. Secondly, since you are both ladies, you will not strike each others' faces. Everything goes apart from these two rules, and you may indulge yourselves to your hearts' content. Also, I will state the loss conditions. One, if anyone breaks the abovementioned two rules, they lose. Two, if anyone surrenders, or if they are knocked down and unable to rise to their feet by the count of ten, they lose as well. In addition, both sides must reconcile with each other after the battle is over. Do you both agree on these four points?"

Emroy was the God of War. Rory was the Apostle of Emroy. Lelei nodded silently, assenting to those conditions. Similarly, Alfie nodded in acknowledgement.

"Then, I, Rory Mercury, Apostle of Emroy, the God of War, grant my sanction to the 13th Lelena Family Sisters Battle!"

Rory's declaration was like a starter's pistol.

Alfie made the first move. There was a flash of light from her right hand, and a small ball of light flew out at Lelei.

In response Lelei summoned a ring of wind around her white robe, easily evading the ball of light.

Right after that, Alfie whipped out a weapon known as a bolas.

Originally, bolas were throwing weapons used for hunting prey. However, in the hands of a skilled user it could be used for all sorts of highly variable attacks, showing great power in the short to medium range. In addition, it was not a heavy weapon, so it was easy to carry on one's person. Usually, bolas were made by joining several weights with a rope, but the bolas Alfie was holding were made of three weights linked by fine chains. In addition, since Alfie was an exponent of mineral magic, she had managed to alter the physical properties of the weapon in her hand — the spiralling weights were made of different materials and heavily enchanted with magic, which released brilliant light in accordance with their user's will.

As he saw this, Itami mumbled, "That, that's..."

Mimoza assumed he was gasping in awe, and stepped in to explain.

"Amazing , isn't it? The current focus of Alfie's research is the use of minerals as a contact medium to release all sorts of magical phenomena. Usually, one would need to use the 'magic principle' to delve into the 'phenomena' from which everything springs. The principle behind the use of a contact medium opens a new possibility in the practice of expressing the 'phenomena' — it becomes faster and simpler. However, the effects produced are as varied as the types of media themselves. For instance, steel simply glows and gets hot. A certain type of media we know can

produce a powerful light. With specially treated wood, one can even produce a defensive barrier. Alfie's research centered around these properties, to discover the fundamental principle governing them."

However, Mimoza's explanation did not dispel Itami's doubts. Instead, he seemed confused, and frowned.

"No, no, I didn't mean that. What I wanted to say was, wouldn't Lelei get hurt if it hit her? Logically speaking, that's what should happen, right? This is... it's definitely not on the level of a mere sister's squabble any more."

"But this is how mages have always settled their disputes with each other."

As the two of them were talking, the sound of the air shattering resounded through the street as blades of compressed air streaked continuously through the air, and debris rained down from the sky like a monsoon. With waves of their staves to defend against an attack, evade, and then slash out horizontally, the attacks of both sides crashed against each other in the middle.

"It's only been a few years, but you've grown quite a bit."

"This white robe isn't for show, you know."

“Bold words. See if I don’t rip the stitches out of your clothes.”

After that, both sides upped their ante — and their firepower. Deflected bolts of light went astray and scorched the eaves of nearby houses. Several chunks of stone debris scattered into the crowd, which drawing howls from them. The fact that nobody had been hurt was a miracle, which seemed to be proof that the people watching were actually mages.

“It, it looks like they’re going out of control...”

Pieces of shattered stone fell from the sky like bullets, making Itami cringe back into his uniform.

The moisture in the air crystallized into icicles, whose sharp tips glittered in the light as they flew back and forth. Some of them stabbed into the nearby walls, and their plaster crumbled and fell.

“The first thing mages of the Lindon School learn is defensive magic. Therefore, in most spell battles, both sides rush to see who can break the other’s defenses first. However... the two of them have very high attack and defensive power. Lelei’s grown so much I can barely recognize her.”

The truth was, both of them had exerted the whole of their abilities, and the pressure was building by the second.

That said, all people had their limits; and at a certain point, both of them stopped moving. They panted, and with every breath they cast an attack spell, before raising their weighty staves and using all their strength to throw up a defensive barrier.

And then, a sound like a heavy lump of metal striking something else echoed all around, raising a cloud of dust.

“Uuu, is this what they mean by a genius? Dammit...”

Alfie clenched her teeth, and took a step forward.

The first half of this battle was like a duel between two knights swinging at each other with all their might. The fact that they had come this far was a testament to a clash of strength versus strength and will versus will.

However, if they continued dragging the fight out like this, the difference in their respective strength would soon become clear — Alfie was attacking less and less, while she was defending more and more.

In this intense situation, Itami felt it was about time to try and stop them. With that, he turned to Rory the referee, and ventured:

“Rory, what should we do now? I think their determination is going to push this fight to a dangerous stage...”

“You’re right, but it would be best to wait a bit more, until victory and defeat are apparent, before we stop them. Otherwise, the grudge between them won’t go away. Look, even under these circumstances, Alfie is still looking for a chance to deliver a decisive counterattack, while Lelei — who’s confident of her victory — is waiting for a chance to finish the fight in a single move.”

Rory had a point, but was it really all right?

However, just as Itami was about to share his thoughts, a wail came from the nearby crowd, clearly unrelated to the sisters’ battle.

There was the sound of a swinging sword, and —

After a cry of anger, there was a moan of pain from someone.

“You coward! Prepare yourself”

At first, people thought it was just two spectators who had gotten into a fight because they were excited. However, when they turned to look, they saw a man with a sword through his chest slumping to the ground.

Though this battle involved the exchange of powerful magic, though it scarred the ground with holes and marks, though the nearby walls were perforated like Swiss cheese, it was still a battle between sisters which took place under the auspices of Rory, Apostle of Emroy, and her precondition was that it did not involve the taking of human life. Because of that, everyone could watch in excitement.

But now, the ground was covered in fresh blood.

Someone had died under the eyes of everyone in attendance — a man whose body was soaked in blood staggered a few steps forward before collapsing to the ground.

After that, everyone's face changed — some grimaced, turning pale, while others flushed red, glaring angrily at the killer, and some looked aside, storming off to summon the guards.

There were even some people who were experienced in these matters, who raised their magic staves as they moved to the side, ready to capture the killer with spells.

There was a wrathful look on Rory's face as she asked:

“...To think you would dare stain the soil of a battleground sanctified by I, Rory. State your reasons for doing so, Gray Co Aldo.”

“Yes.”

The killer — Knight-in-Training Gray, sheathed his bloodstained sword and genuflected before Rory.

“Your Holiness, it has been a while. This one is honored to meet you again.”

The deference this man was showing seemed somewhat exaggerated. The reason why he did this was due to the hostility of everyone around him.

To him, the first thing to do when asserting the rightness of his actions was to project a straightforward yet humble image of himself. It was of paramount importance. One could say that in this place, it was exactly the right thing to do, and as he drew the attention of the surrounding audience, they slowly stopped what they were doing to watch.

Naturally, Gray’s answer was loud enough for everyone to hear.

“I understand that your Holiness is upset by this development, but if you will permit this one to speak one thing, it would be that this one hopes everyone can swiftly leave this place. Eliminating one assassin does not guarantee this place is safe.”

Gray's words raised a commotion from the people around him. When he said this place was "unsafe", it implied that there was danger here. But who was in danger? What kind of danger was it? Everyone looked around in confusion.

The kneeling Lelei and Alfie seemed to have recovered from the exertions of the intense battle, and when they heard this they had no choice but to raise their heads.

Shortly after Gray showed himself, the person who had searched the deceased man's body and belongings — Shandy Kaf Marea — approached Rory and produced the crossbow she had just found.

At a closer look, the crossbow was drawn and a bolt fitted to the string. If it were a gun, one could say that it had been loaded, the hammer was pulled back, and the safety was off. In other words, a round would be fired once the trigger was pulled. Normally, nobody would go around with a weapon in that state upon their persons. Because of that, one could infer that the dead man had been aiming at someone with this weapon and planning to shoot them. All this lent a great deal of credibility to Gray's words.

At this moment, Lelei and Alfie looked at each other — what was going on? The two of them had no idea was going on, and so they asked Shandy:

"What was with that man?"

“That man was hiding in the crowd with the intention of killing you, Lelei-sama.”

“Ehhhhhhh?! But why?!”

The person who cried out was not Lelei, but her sister Alfie.

“I cannot explain now. Everyone, please hurry and...”

Everyone reacted slowly to Gray’s words, as though they were unable to comprehend what he was talking about. However, there was one person who immediately understood what was going in times like these.

“Got it. Everyone, follow me. Quickly, let’s get out of here.”

That person was Itami. He gathered Lelei and Alfie together and hurried them on, going, “come on, come on, come on,” breaking into a stride as he shunted the people on the street out of the way, leaving the restaurant ‘Marina’ behind him.

Gray and Shandy followed behind him, levelling watchful looks at everyone around them.

At the same time, Itami called Yao over and told her, “Go back to the inn first and see what’s going on.”

Perhaps she was delighted by being given a task, Yao replied in a cheery voice:

“Understood! I’m to make sure there’s nobody suspicious hanging around the inn, right?”

“Tuka, you go with her too. Please.”

At this moment, Tuka — who still had trouble understanding what was going on — immediately agreed, nodding and saying, “It can’t be helped”.

And so, Tuka and Yao jogged back to the inn ahead of the others.

Lelei and Alfie followed them. Behind them were Mimoza and Itami, while Rory, Gray and Shandy shot wary looks all around them.

“Tell me, who’s set their sights on Lelei? She’s a good girl.”

Mimoza’s protestation made Gray and Shandy look at each other.

Both of them were hesitant and unsure of how to answer. There were many people around and many ears to hear what they had to say, so this was not a good place to talk. That said, Itami also wanted to learn something about this. Therefore, he decided to change his tack and asked them questions instead — he pressed them on matters within the

area they could explain and avoided questions which were difficult to answer, trying to get the information he needed through inference.

“Who gave you your orders? The Princess?”

“Yes,” Shandy said.

She had been repeating the same set of actions since just now — she stopped, looked around and then quickly paced forward again. This made her breathing fast and uneven, and her brown hair was glued to her forehead with sweat.

Shandy felt she had been a fool. If not for this assignment, she could have been a translator during the talks in the Imperial capital. However, reality was indifferent to her wishes, and right now, she was forced to work a dirty, grimy job in a place like this.

“Her Imperial Highness commands that we are to take Lelei-sama to the Imperial Capital. In addition, her Highness said that Itami-sama and his companions would surely trust Gray and myself. And then, surprisingly enough, we learned who was hiring the assassins, and proceeded here with all speed.

The reason why Gray could earn Itami and his companions’ trust was because he had been closely acquainted with Itami and the others during the Battle of Italica and

introduced by Shandy, who had been learning Japanese in Arnus.

“So who’s gunning for Lelei... no, you can’t answer this question here. However, I’m sure you can tell me why you’re so tight-lipped, right?”

“As expected of you, Itami-sama. As for ‘who’ it is, we’re still in the guessing phase, and speaking incautiously will only jeopardize our chances at nabbing them.”

After saying that, he added, “However...” and then proceeded to clarify his words.

“However... the news of the Flame Dragon’s head in the Imperial Capital has won you much fame in the Imperial Capital and its surroundings, Lelei-sama. One could say that everyone knows of you, and that ‘someone’ is unhappy with that.”

“The Flame Dragon’s head showed up in the Imperial Capital?”

“Did you not know of this?”

“If I’m not wrong, the head of the Dragon was taken by the Dark Elves. They said something about wanting to use the Dragon’s head as evidence and tell the entire world that

the Flame Dragon was dead, and let everyone know that their lives would no longer be in danger...”

“Indeed, it could be used in that way.”

“And it was very effective. Because of that, everyone’s opinion of you is at an unprecedented level, Lelei-sama.”

Although Gray and Shandy had made their explanations to Itami, he still tilted his head and muttered, “How strange” in confusion. This was because they had not said a thing about why only Lelei was so popular. If the reason was because she slew the Flame Dragon, then everyone here should be a target, but the truth proved that this hypothesis was flawed.

And then, Gray stopped and looked back to Lelei before saying:

“It is known that the fame is not solely yours, Lelei-sama. However, because you and your companions are either foreigners or not human at all, the humans in the Empire react much differently to you than to your other companions. This one feels the matter stems from this.”

Itami was still confused.

“What?”

“It’s because Lelei-sama is both a citizen of the Empire and a member of the human species.”

“My people are nomadic and call no place home. I have no intention of becoming an Imperial citizen.”

“The smallfolk do not care about these circumstances. No, I can’t say that — perhaps it is because of these circumstances that the people cheer for you. Say what they may, this was a task which the nobles, the army, or even the Emperor could not accomplish. And now you — not even a citizen of the Empire — managed to do it. Your existence is a great encouragement to anyone who does not wish to labor under the Empire’s rule.”

Itami felt that this might be similar to the attitude of “cheering on the Japanese team in overseas baseball or soccer tournaments”. If the Japanese team won, the media would air all sorts of special programs revolving around them day and night. However, the members of the other baseball teams would not receive any coverage at all. Only a small fraction of die-hard fans would care about those teams — in a sense, that example was oddly suited to this situation.

“Oi, wait a minute. Your explanation still doesn’t tell me why someone would want Lelei’s life.”

Gray was naturally wary of someone who had been fighting Lelei not five minutes ago. He asked, "My apologies, but who might you be?"

Before Alfie could answer, Lelei injected from the side, "She's my big sister."

"So that's what it was! That battle of yours from just now was just a sisterly spat. That was quite a magnificent display of sibling rivalry."

"That's not important. You haven't answered my question yet. Why is Lelei being targeted. Speaking of which, what's all this about the Flame Dragon's head?"

"Oya, you didn't know?"

Gray looked at Lelei in confusion.

"I didn't tell her."

"What a shock. You should have told her from the beginning."

"I didn't do anything outstanding."

"There's your problem. Lelei-sama, you and your companions have no idea how impressive that feat was."

Gray had a look on his face that seemed to say, “I don’t believe this”, and then he shook his head. After that, he summarized the details of the Flame Dragon incident to Alfie.

“Not long ago, the Flame Dragon was slain by the combined efforts of your honored sister and everyone present.”

“What? Don’t be stupid... hey, is that true?”

Gray paid no heed to Alfie’s question, and continued speaking in a calm, matter-of-fact tone — to him, there was no time to waste on dispelling her doubts. At the same time, it was precisely because of Gray’s tone that Alfie realised that he was telling the truth.

“It would seem that ‘someone’ is deeply repulsed by Lelei-sama’s accomplishments. That person has brought out various reasons to convince themselves of the rightness of their prejudice: “Real live heroes are a pain to deal with”, or “I can’t stomach it if she’s not a citizen of the Empire” and so on... But no matter what reason that person brings out, the ultimate root cause of that problem, the reason why they can’t just let it go, is simply this — they are jealous.”

“I see.”

Itami nodded as he mumbled to himself. It would seem this was why Lelei had been targeted.

“However, the problem now is that the assassins they sent are not amateurs. The fact that Lelei-sama slew the Flame Dragon has drawn the full attention of the person pulling the strings, and so that person has sent skilled killers to carry out the mission. This one and Shandy-dono alone are not enough to stop these people. Therefore I hope you can all lend us a hand in this.”

“Of course. Who would say ‘no’ to protecting the people close to them?”

Itami’s prompt answer drew a keen stare from Lelei.

“Marvellous. I expected as much from one of the legendary Men in Green. Then, let us join hands and soundly smite these assassins!”

However, Itami shook his head as he heard Gray speak, and the look of his head seemed to say, “I might disappoint you, sorry about that”.

“Hey, do I really look that combative to you?”



Chapter 4

JGSDF Imperial Capital Akusho Operations Center

Normally, only the permanent staff would occupy the interior of this operations center, but this week it was full of people. The interior buzzed with heat and activity.

The displays that were everywhere showed footage from hidden cameras. Leading Private Sasagawa clutched the wireless handset as he spoke to all sorts of people, while Leading Private Tozu and the others placed red and green unit markers on the map of the Imperial Capital that was spread on a table.

Apart from that, the important intelligence personnel from 2nd Branch were trying to make sense of the events within the Imperial Capital, as well as to put their painstakingly established intelligence network to use.

In the corner of the corridor was Master Sergeant Nishina. He lay on a camping bed, snoring as he scratched his belly in his sleep. Everyone had been working day and night, and they rested in shifts.

“We’re back from shopping.”

The Kurokawa and Kuribayashi pair had returned. Beside them was their helper, the Winged Woman Mizari. All three of them were holding bags.

Thus, all the men thanked them before gathering around them, and even the people who had been sleeping leapt up from their beds. After that, they peeked into the bags they snatched from Kuribayashi, but when they saw what was inside, a great cry of “What, this again?!” filled the air.

The bags contained rye bread — black and hard from being baked at high temperatures — meat jerky, and dried fruits.

“If you don’t like it, don’t eat it! We had to fight tooth and nail for these!” Kuribayashi raised her fists as she shouted. Tozu and Sasagawa muttered their apologies and scurried away.

As Sergeant Major Kuwabara chewed on something which looked like a dried red date, he tilted his head.

“It’s been bothering me for some time, but where do you get this stuff from? None of the shops are open. Could it be...”

“I sure as hell didn’t break into people’s houses with these fists to steal it!” Kuribayashi shouted back before he could finish.

“We got them from Furuta’s black market.”

“Oi oi, is that alright? Didn’t the previous chefs fall foul of Zorzal because he suspected that they were poisoning the

Emperor? Is it really all right to sell food stolen from the palace?"

Kuwabara tapped lightly at his head with a chopping motion. Of course, this was not the usual reference of being fired from a job, but of the chef's head literally being chopped off.

"It'll be fine because he has Zorzal's favor. Besides, it's not as though he's stealing it from the palace. He makes arrangements with the merchants that deal with him and passes them on."

"That's thanks to us; otherwise getting any food on these streets would be very difficult," Mizari said as she distributed the rations to the men in the operations center.

She then went up the stairs, and there she found one of the servicemen who did not have much contact with his peers, on account of the fact that he either hid inside this room or was wandering everywhere.

"Kenzaky, food's here. There's enough for everyone."

"Oh... thanks."

Sergeant Kenzaki, who was lying on the bed, accepted the food Mizari offered him.

After that, he pulled Mizari onto the bed, which startled her.

However, she said, “So that’s what it’s about, preparing for setting up shop?”

Mizari lightly tapped Kenzaki’s arm. The man flashed her a charming smile and immediately released her. Their back-and-forth touching was just the way they teased each other.

Still, he was up here shirking work and not helping the others downstairs who were practically working themselves to death, so she wanted to see what he was doing up here. His life was like this as well — either he was sleeping here or exercising, or he was nowhere to be found for several days.

When he returned, he often radiated a killing intent that made her shudder. When she met his gaze then, she was paralyzed, like a frog being menaced like a snake. Thoughts like “I’m going to die” and “Do whatever you want” crossed her mind during those times.

Men like him who emitted an air of prickliness were not uncommon in Akusho, but there was nobody whose presence was as sharp and cutting as his. This made Mizari keenly aware of the differences between their respective worlds.

“Kenzaky... this week’s been pretty bad. How about tonight, will it be okay?”

“I’m sorry, but it’s forbidden. Another time, perhaps.”

Although she had expected that answer, Mizari still felt a little disappointed.

Elsewhere, Kurokawa looked in on the interior of the operation center, intending to report to Major Nyutabara. However, she found Nyutabara reporting the Imperial Capital’s situation to Colonel Imazu in Arnus, and he gestured to Kurokawa “Thanks, but please wait a while.”

If she listened carefully, she could hear Imazu’s Kansai accent through the handset.

“Got it. The pro-peace senators have all been placed under house arrest. Then, how’s the situation on the streets?”

“It’s been a week since the Emperor collapsed, and there’s no sign that they’ll lift the state of martial law on the Imperial Capital. There are troops everywhere on the streets, menacing the citizens. They’re allowed to move about during the day, but since movement in and out of the capital is restricted, just about all the shops have run out of stock and closed down. As a result, the number of pedestrians has dwindled to almost nothing. The Imperial Capital Operations Center is running out of rations as well. Please resupply us as soon as possible.”

“What? There should be enough rations for 150 men. An army marches on its stomach. You have to manage your food properly!”

“The Vice-Minister and her entourage consume a lot of it. Remember, the Vice-Minister, her maids and manservants all need to be fed.”

“If that’s the case, it seems food will be more effective than money as a bribe. The supplies will come as soon as possible. We’ll airdrop after we confirm the C-1 transports’ schedule. Also, how are the Vice-Minister and the others?”

“Well, while they’re nominally under confinement, they’ve still been allowed free use of the Jade Palace, so the diplomatic agreement should still be in effect. I guess they’re not touching them because they’re our foreign ambassadors, no?”

“No. That sort of humanitarian thinking won’t work here. Idiots are called idiots because they do idiotic things that we don’t do. You need to abandon all your previous logic. Be on your guard against being put on the defensive and being placed in difficult situations. Do you understand?”

After rebuking Nyutabara for his optimistic view of the situation, Imazu considered the information he had obtained so far.

“In any event, it seems Zorzal’s coup was a success.”

“Mm. Zorzal took advantage of the Emperor’s illness and announced that he would be dissolving the Senate and taking power as the Prince Regent. After command of the Empire’s armies was transferred to him and various legions pledged their loyalty, he placed the Imperial Capital under martial law. Most of the pro-peace senators have fled with their households.”

“Got it. The fact that they took their families with them implies they had no other choice but to flee. If the situation gets truly dangerous, we will immediately withdraw; otherwise you will have to hold position. Understood?”

“I understand. However, there are some household members of the absent senators who were not taken along. Shall we protect them?”

“You cannot act without thinking. If you help them for no good reason, it will only put them in a worse place. You have to consider the situation carefully.”

“I see.”

“In any event, you need to keep an eye on the Vice-Minister and our comrades in Foreign Affairs. Also, the Emperor’s health. Whether he lives, dies, or has a chance to recover

are Essential Elements of Information (EEIs), get it? I've said so much, but in the end it's up to you guys."

"Sir!"

With that, Nyutabara terminated his call to Imazu.

"The Emperor's sickness... Anyone here have contacts within the Palace?"

Nyutabara called out into the Operations Center, but the only person who responded was Kurokawa, standing before him.

"At this time, I think Staff Sergeant Tomita — who has a close bond with one of Princess Pina's confidantes — might be able to help."

Imperial Palace — Ula Bianca

Currently, the Imperial Palace was in utter chaos.

Once the Crown Prince Zorzal announced his accession to power as the Prince Regent, he proceeded to distribute key positions in the domestic, finance, agriculture, foreign affairs and palace ministries to his own people, as well as defining the powers of those offices.

It was true that the Regency as administered by the Crown Prince had control over the national ministries. However, rearranging them was something which should have been done under the auspices of the true Emperor. Zorzal had done so because he wanted to ensure his policies were carried out. However, the sudden elevation of his lackeys to the same level as current ministers and the forceful seizure of the functions of state left the political scene in turmoil.

Of course, the law did not limit the ministers that propped up Zorzal's regency in any way. However, the masses would not be able to accept that. Still, the Emperor was sick, and nobody knew when he would succumb to his illness. In the near future, the ministers chosen by the Prince Regent might end up being their superiors. If they publicly opposed them and drew censure, they might be placing themselves in a difficult situation. In other words, they had to protect themselves in the face of an uncertain future. Thus, an uneasy situation arose where the current and future ministers both held a degree of power.

Of course, the opposition to Zorzal soon popped out of the woodwork. They argued "Why is it that a mere Crown Prince is allowed the power over a nation?" and so on. However, once Zorzal's status as heir was legitimized and he began flaunting his might, their arguments against him lost their power. They could only stand if the other side actually respected them to begin with. They were useless

against someone whose aim was to run roughshod over the opposition.

The current ministers derived their authority and powers from the Emperor. However, the Emperor was currently indisposed. Therefore, they were holding on for dear life like candles in the wind, unable to enact policy. In addition, while they did not discuss the idea of being suppressed by an ascendant Zorzal in the past on general principle, now they had no choice in the matter.

In addition, now that the pro-peace faction had almost all been subject to house arrest, only the proponents of wars remained to decide matters

Resolutions which benefited the pro-war faction and bills which went in Zorzal's favor were passed without any opposition. Because of that, most of the ministers were left stymied in the face of this chaos and could do nothing but hope the Emperor would recover soon.

After the announcement of the arrival of the Prince Regent, the doors to the Regency Hall swung open.

Under the eyes of the future ministers, bureaucrats, and the young generals who would manage military affairs, Zorzal strode in majestically through the opened doors.

The ambitious young bureaucrats and military officers dressed themselves in grand clothing stitched with gold and silver threads which reflected the Prince Regent's own grandeur. They far exceeded the current ministers in the field of luxurious dress, and they looked like they could have come out of a painting.

Behind the Prince Regent was Tyuule.

Her status was still that of the Prince Regent's possession. However, ever since Zorzal's ascension, everyone saw his shadow when they looked at her. As the closest person to Zorzal's brilliance, she reflected a faint light of her own, and she received the treatment of an empress despite technically being a slave.

Zorzal casually shed his cloak, tossing it to Tyuule, who was waiting by his side. After that, he approached the Prince Regent's seat and took it.

Tyuule accepted the cloak, her face a mask of neutrality. She clutched it to herself, waiting by his side like an obedient maid.

On the other hand, Pina — who had been kept waiting for quite some time — advanced to Zorzal's throne and asked angrily:

“Nii-sama! Why did you relieve Marquis Casel, Lord Cicero and the other members of the pro-peace faction of their posts, and then place them under house arrest?”

Zorzal furrowed his brows in confusion. He had a look of bafflement on his face as he explained:

“House arrest is such an ugly word. These people are all suspected of being bought off by Nihon. Therefore, they are being confined to their own homes until investigations are complete.”

“Being bought off? That’s it?”

“Yes. Their guilt is quite apparent, even going by what we can see on the surface. When the investigation is concluded, we will naturally have to deliver suitable punishment to them.”

“And will these punishments be decided through official hearings, Ani-ue?”

“We are at war. In the army, anyone in our forces who dances to the enemy’s tune and thus aids them must be dealt with. Do you think we have the luxury of holding tribunals for every single one of them? Decisiveness is the key to victory.”

As he said this, Pina's field of vision suddenly blacked out for a moment.

Indeed, the punishment for military personnel spreading falsehoods and being corrupted by the enemy was a summary execution. However, all that was only done on the eve of battle or when battle was staring them in the eyes. In the first place, summary punishments should not have been handed out. For instance, even a superior officer could not randomly condemn his own men to death. In many cases of mistrial, defendants were not put on trial because "their subordinates were punished", but because the tribunal wanted to hear "why the subordinates were punished". And if there was no satisfactory reason for that, then the superior officer would himself be subject to punishment.

Pina looked at her brother, who did not seem to have grasped this principle and who was using the argument of "it's done like this in the military" to accuse anybody he wanted. Her body went weak.

"Ah, Ani-ue. How far are you going to take this..."

"I tire of this, Pina. While Father is sick, it falls to me as Prince Regent to administer the government. Since that's the case, everyone has to do as I say."

“Ani-ue, there must be something wrong about your understanding of the succession of power, no? It comes with bearing the responsibility of the station! It’s not to be used to do whatever you want!”

“Ahhh, what a pain in the ass! I forbid you to address me with that nitpicking attitude! Is that the tone you should be taking with me?”

“That is the tone I have always taken with the Emperor.”

Zorzal was stunned into silence by Pina’s calm retort, and his vision swam for a moment.

“Cheh. Well, that’s true and I accept that. However, I will not tolerate this when I become Emperor.”

“Then, will you chop off my head?”

“Of course not. You haven’t been bought off by Nihon. It’s good that you’re focusing on your work.”

“However, the newly appointed representatives, including Count Woody and Baron Clayton among others, don’t even plan to look at the peace treaty!”

“Nonsense. These people also hope for peace at the end. However, we cannot discuss peace under these conditions. That is all.”

“You talk like you have the upper hand.”

Pina levelled a cutting remark at him, but Zorzal would not admit defeat.

“Are defeatists so blinded by their pessimistic worldview that they cannot see any way to win? Helm, Mudra, Karasta!” Zorzal shouted toward the ranks of soldiers before him.

The three of them, standing at the head of the other officers, advanced before Zorzal and genuflected before him.

In the middle was Viscount Helm, on the right was Sir Mudra, and on the left was the son of Marquis Karasta. Each of them had been granted the position of General in Zorzal’s regency. In addition, Helm and Karasta were two of the prisoners released by Japan several days ago.

“Then, shall I ask you gentlemen about what lies within your hearts? Speak, and clear away Pina’s foolishness.”

In response to Zorzal’s query, Helm rose.

“Indeed, it is as Princess Pina says; open combat against that foe is futile. That being the case, if we adopt another approach, we may be able to gain the advantage.”

“Is that so. But there is no time to worry; what our Empire needs now is victory.”

“I know. Then, please watch as I lead the enemy by the nose.”

“Oh? And how will you do that?” Zorzal asked as he leaned forward.

“We shall fully embrace the idea of evil. They say the enemy called Nihon loves the common folk too much. Thus, let us gather the Goblins and Kobolds and attack the cities near Arnus, the villages and the caravans. We will burn their farms, kill their animals, and poison their wells. In all directions, north, south, east and west, we shall turn the area into a wasteland.”

“That is nothing more than scorched-earth tactics. But will this not invite an enemy counterattack?”

“No. After all, it is only the demihumans who are doing so as bandits. They have nothing to do with us, and we know nothing about it...”

“I see. However, that will cause the army of Nihon to harry the marauding demihumans and bandits. What will you do, then? Will you fight?”

“An unbeatable foe is nothing to be worried about. If we encounter them, our troops can pose as traders and wave to them in a friendly manner. We can remove our armor and blend in with the villagers, or pass through national borders and infiltrate neighboring countries. We can take the people we meet on the roads as hostages, and tell our pursuers to back off if they want the hostages to live. Since they are willing to protect homeless wanderers, then we shall gather those starving refugees who have lost their homes and pack them off toward Arnus and encourage them to seek aid there. That way, we can mix our people in with these refugees and infiltrate the enemy.”

Zorzal was left speechless after hearing all that.

His mouth opened and closed a couple of times, as though he was deciding whether or not to speak. He thought, *is it really alright to let him do this?* He had to take another look at the man before him. Because of that, the others were exceptionally shocked by his words.

Helm was a general who knew the horrors of reducing an enemy's territory to bloody ash. Even desiring the regular consequences of conventional warfare would be seen as a bloodlust by others. Therefore, having someone like him propose such a reprehensible plan was quite the shocking development.

Pina was furious, and with brows furrowed, she drew her sword.

“Have, have you no shame, Helm? Do you dare call yourself a proud soldier?!”

Viscount Helm was one of the first graduates of Pina’s Knight band, which made her even more incensed. The fact that one of her former comrades could actually speak of a tactic like that — no, calling such deplorable methods tactics was disgraceful in its own right — was absolutely disgusting to her.

However, Helm countered: “Then, can you defeat them on the field of battle?”

“Let’s leave that aside for now. I’m asking you about our pride as soldiers! What of the Empire’s reputation?”

“If we are beaten then our reputation and pride will be food for the dogs. It’s all well and good for a soldier to conduct himself in a righteous and high-minded manner, but they are all for nothing if we are defeated in the end. Shall we leave a reputation for honor after death? No, it’s not worth it. It’s not worth it at all. I would rather enjoy a glorious and prosperous life rather than death.”

“What, what happened to the man I used to know?”

“There was no need for that in the past, so I did not do it. I too paid attention to my public bearing and reputation. But now that we have encountered a foe we cannot defeat by normal means, we no longer have the luxury of such indulgences.”

Helm’s words did make sense. Zorzal felt that it would be effective if they infiltrated the people and launched attacks on the army of Nihon. It would make their men guarded and suspicious. Their reprisals would surely wound the people. If they turned the cities into a battlefield, they could accuse the Nihon soldiers of massacring innocents. If they did that, the people would hate the army of Nihon, and view them as enemies. The foe would have to constantly watch their backs. It was a truly brilliant scheme.

“Lord Helm, how about disguising ourselves as the enemy and attacking settlements all over the place?”

Zorzal shouted “Good!” and slapped his thigh in response to Mudra’s suggestion.

Mudra was the third son of a merchant, and ever since he had enlisted, he had earned a name for himself as a pillar of the army’s logistics division.

Due to his birth, there were ugly rumors about how Mudra had abused his position to resell official supplies. However,

no such thing had ever occurred, and Mudra used his vital work in the transport of material resources to dispel such hearsay. As such, he had moved up in life, and now possessed a knighthood.

“Mm, that’s a good move too. We’ll blacken the enemy’s reputation. Since we’re doing this, let us attack the people within the city, with all the burning of houses, plundering of riches and raping of women that implies. In that way, their reputations will be trod into the dirt and their names will be uttered as curses. When they have to deal with both the Empire and its people, they will not have such an easy time of it as they do now.”

“That’s exactly right. In addition, we can replenish our resources and expenses through doing so as well, so I see no downsides to that. Speaking of which, what does the enemy wear? Do we have any samples of their clothing so we can duplicate it?”

“When I was on campaign in the land of Ginza, I saw what the enemy wore. After I was taken captive, their image was branded deeply into my eyes.”

“Me too!” Karasta shouted.

The first two people had been elevated purely through their successes, but Karasta had reached his military position by virtue of his birth.

For someone like him, who had been born the first son of a Marquis, accomplishments were not very important.

Therefore, he had not earned the ire of others even though he did not display valor on the battlefield. On the other hand, any successes he did achieve were quickly rumored to have been stolen from someone else. However, he was not a completely incapable person. Perhaps it was because he treated the people around him kindly, but he ended up becoming friends with the people around him, with their overconfidence, ambition, and cruelty.

Zorzal rose, a beaming smile on his face.

“Helm, go and begin your operation.”

“Understood. Then, I shall begin our preparations.”

That sort of thing could not be considered a military operation. Pina shouted, “Please, I’m begging you, stop.” But her words were ignored and discarded. She looked to Zorzal, tears brimming in her eyes.

“A-ani-sama, please, don’t do this!”

“What are you on about, Pina? We’ll discuss this later, I’m busy now. Next, Advocate-General Rufrus, how’s progress on the matter I ordered earlier?”

A white-haired youth stepped forward from among the bureaucrats.

He was a skinny man with a sinister look on his face, and there was no sense of warmth in him.

“We’ve finished preparing the bill for the special legislation pertaining to the *oprichnina*. We’re almost done selecting the key personnel too, so once the bill passes, we will begin purging the pro-peace faction.”

(TL Note: *Oprichnina* was the Russian policy of instituting secret police, mass repressions, executions, confiscation of land etc. Basically a reign of terror to eliminate traitors.)

As she heard those words, Pina looked to the ground, her expression unreadable.

“Hang on, hang on, what you said just now was...”

She mumbled like she was talking to herself, and clawed at her scalp through her crimson hair.

She had thought and theorized and worked for so long and at last she thought she could be at peace. But in the end, all the hopes she thought she had accumulated collapsed into dust. Perhaps she could pull herself together once or twice, working up the spirit to continue fighting, but if it went on three or four or more times, she could not help but wonder if she was cursed by something. It was now that she realised how powerless she was in the hands of fate.

“Why? Why did it end up like this?”

It was clear that Pina’s weakness came from her nervousness over the horrors Zorzal would soon unleash. The Crown Prince’s appetite for sadism knew no limit.

After leaving the Regency, Pina strode unsteadily toward the Western Palace, to the residence of her second brother Diabo.

Pina was afflicted with the chronic disease known as despair, but she still managed to pull together her remaining scraps of courage. Realizing she could not stop Zorzal by herself, she decided to ask someone else for help.

“Ani-sama? Ani-sama, where are you?”

However, nobody answered Pina’s calls. Normally, Diabo’s servants and his maids should have come out to welcome her, but the palace seemed so quiet and empty that one might have thought that nobody had ever lived here.

“What’s going on? Nii-sama, Diabo-niisama!”

Pina wandered throughout the vast palace before finding her brother, who was sorting out his luggage with a

servant. The young servant carried a heavy pack on his back. He was sweating heavily and had a distressed look on his face.

“Shut up, Pina! What do you want?”

“It’s nothing special... Nii-san, what’s this? Are you preparing to go somewhere?”

“I’ve decided, I’m fleeing this place. I’ve already sent my followers away. I can’t take them with me. Ah, right, I let them take everything valuable here as a reward for their loyalty. It’s just that... once you die, it’s all meaningless, hahaha.”

Diabo laughed heartily as he regarded his empty palace.

“Fleeing? Please, please don’t do something so irresponsible! Help me stop Zorzal nii-sama!”

“What foolishness are you spouting? Why should I help you do something so dangerous?”

“Nii-sama, you have a seat on the Senate. Also, don’t you feel any responsibility to this country as a member of the Imperial Household?”

“I’m not fleeing the Imperial Capital because I’m abdicating all my responsibilities. In fact, the opposite is true — in

order to do my duty, in order to stop Zorzal, I'm planning to borrow some strength from other countries..."

"Other countries? But if you do that, won't that plunge this country further into chaos?"

History was littered with examples of losing one's territory or even one's entire country by borrowing external power to quell internal disputes. It was abundantly clear from that same history that there were no such thing as friends at a national level.

"All right, then how are you going to stop him? Do you think Zorzal's the kind of man who'll listen to words alone? If you want to talk him down, you'll need to back your words up with an equal amount of power."

"That may be so, but we might be able to slowly bring him around, so it might be too early to flee right now..."

"No way. According to my investigations, he's already tossed the people who are pro-peace and opposed to him into jail. If you try and lecture him, who knows what will happen."

"He's going to institute *oprichnina*. That's much too cruel. We have to stop it from being carried out, no matter what."

Pina chewed at her fingers as she said that.

“But that’s impossible! The only people left in the Senate are the pro-war people.”

In desperation, Pina dashed forward and embraced Diabo.

“Diabo-nii-sama! For the sake of the future, please lend me and the Empire a hand!”

“Hey, let go, let go of me! Metmes, what’s up with her?!”

Diabo flailed his arms in a panic. However, Pina’s grip was surprisingly strong and he could not slip her grasp easily. The lad who was Diabo’s manservant was similarly powerless to dislodge the Princess’ hands, no matter how Diabo ordered him. At his wits’ end, all he could do was repeat, “Your Highness, please calm down! Please, calm down!”

“You’re so mean! You’re a mean old brother who’s going to abandon me without even listening to me! How can I let go if you’re like that?”

“Let go! Pina! So why don’t you run away with me?”

“I can’t abandon Father on his sickbed!”

“Just let go of me!”

“You’re mean. Nii-sama, help me, please!”

Diabo struggled valiantly under Pina's full-strength grab. Pina's hair was in a mess, but she was unwilling to release her grip around Diabo's waist. This was not a simple contest of strength between the two of them, so Diabo could not do something like cast Pina aside. Thus he did not struggle as desperately as he should have. In the end, Diabo abandoned his attempts to wriggle free of his little sister's grasp and clicked his tongue.

"...I get it. I'll do as you say. It can't be helped..."

"Do you get it now?"

Pina smiled in delight. It would seem the two of them had relaxed, though they were both covered in sweat. Still, Pina did not lower her guard, and remained fastened around Diabo.

"However, I have certain conditions."

"What kind of conditions?"

"Whatever the circumstances, you and I are both competitors with Zorzal for the succession. Trying to go up against him under those conditions could be fatal. Don't forget that."

Pina did not want to step into the realm where their lives would be in danger if either of her brothers said anything.

However, Pina looked at the matter objectively. The loss of a father or brother was an inevitable casualty when competing for supreme power. They could not be as loving as normal siblings.

“.....I understand.”

“In any case, we have to be prepared to lose our lives. I trust I don’t need to keep going on and on about it? Don’t forget.”

Pina nodded again, somewhat more sedately.

“I understand.”

“Well then, since it’s like that... I need a matching promise from you.”

A vague sense of dissatisfaction grew in Pina, and she squeezed Diabo around the waist.

“Then, what do you want me to do?”

“Come to think about it, I received a copy of your subordinate’s report about the dragonslayers. It read like some kind of heroic epic...”

“That was a mistake on my part. Forgive me for not properly instructing the writer on how to do her job.”

“No, I felt it was quite well-written. I was more interested in that Dark Elf girl. She was willing to trade her body in order to save her tribe. In order to fulfil the task asked of her, she gave everything she could give. It was a truly poetic image, I feel.”

“Ah...?”

“Then, can you do the same thing?”

“Ah?”

“That is, can you offer yourself to me the way she did?”

“What do you mean by...”

“That is to say, are you willing to serve me in bed as my pillow?”

As she heard that, Pina immediately backed away from Diabo.

“Ah, ah, Ani-sama, what, what did you just say?”

“I said exactly what I said. My meaning should be very clear. Do you need me to explain more directly before you understand?”

Pina’s face turned as red as her crimson hair, and she replied:

“Nii, nii-sama... we, aren't we brother and sister? Well, we only share a father... but, but we're still siblings bound by blood and, and... I don't think it's quite right.”

“And what of that? There's no problem with us becoming man and wife.”

“No, no problem? I don't like it. It, it means I would bear your child, nii-sama...”

“Hmph. So after all that talk about thinking about the country, that's all you can really give of yourself. You speak so grandly about offering up others' lives but you don't dare breach a taboo like that. That is your limit.”

“Ah...”

Diabo patted himself down and rearranged his messed-up clothes. He scoffed at Pina.

“The long and short of it is that politics is bringing someone over to your point of view and making him agree with you. Human beings live surrounded by all sorts of selfish desires. You need to consider all sorts of methods to make use of these desires. Inflaming passions and controlling emotions is a good skill to have. Zorzal's use of violence and fear to maintain his grip on his power is clearly quite effective. In other words, that man's actions were more

suitable to the situation than yours were. You didn't even stop to consider the meaning of your actions before acting out and throwing a tantrum like a child. Forget it, don't mind it, I'm sorry I scared you. I was just testing to see if you had any ulterior motives. I meant nothing by it. Please forgive me."

"Wait, wait!"

"What, changed your mind?"

Pina reached a hand out to Diabo, who looked her up and down like he was tasting her body with his eyes. It was all terribly exaggerated, and it was clear that he intended to play on Pina's sense of disgust and her pride.

However, Pina clutched at Diabo's sleeve with trembling hands.

"If I do as you say, Diabo-nii... then will you help me stop Zorzal-nii?"

Pina's face was covered by her hair and thus unreadable. However, one could sense her fear and her conviction warring within her tiny, tremulous voice.

"Stop it. Don't force yourself to say something you don't want to."

"...Which means you'll help me?"

“Well... even if you say that, I can't do something that's impossible for me. Pina, I misspoke. This isn't a problem you can solve just by enduring a bit of pain for a while. Rolling around with you all night, no, all day and night, without a break would be quite painful for an inexperienced girl like you.”

“...That's fine.”

“Hold, hold on! There's a big difference between saying you can do it and actually doing it!”

“I'll endure it. No, saying I'll endure you would be disrespectful to you, nii-sama. Please enter me. Your little sister would like nothing more than to be embraced by her big brother.”

Her words were clear and her reply was swift. This was the proof that Pina was determined to cross the line in her heart.

On the other hand, Diabo was sweating heavily. The look on his face practically screamed “oh crap”. He began backing off at full speed.

“Then... Pina, this is moving a little too fast. Shouldn't you respect yourself a little more?”

“It's fine. Nii-sama, let's fall together!”

Pina's expression was clearly one which was detached from normality. She had a creepy smile on her face, a sure sign of a deranged mind.

"Don't fall into depravity!" Diabo shouted.

However, Pina — who had crossed that line in her heart — paid his words no heed.

"Mm. Still, doing it like this is a little distasteful. I'd like to bathe first, and these clothes are kind of in the way... Nii-sama, please wait a bit for me."

Pina was muttering things to herself which made Diabo's heart rate pick up.

"Pina! Can you hear me! Oi~"

Diabo lightly patted Pina's face with a *patapata* sound, but Pina turned her glazed, unfocused eyes on Diabo.

"Then, I'll be back soon. But you have to wait for me."

And then she ran off to the Western Palace.

"Well then, Diabo-sama. What shall we do now? Shall I set out a bed?" said Metmes the manservant.

“There’s no need for that! I don’t want to sleep with my little sister! I’m leaving.”

“Is that really all right? Princess Pina asked you to wait for her.”

“It’s fine! Leave me be!”

“Well, about that... your servant feels that hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.”

“It’s a damn sight better than being killed by Zorzal for stating an opinion. We’re going!”

“Ah, yes!”

And so, Diabo and his servant left the Imperial Capital.

Elsewhere, Pina returned to her suite, gathered her maids, and soaked herself in a bathtub infused with scented oils. She carefully combed her hair, applied some light makeup, put on her best seduction panties, and then veiled herself in her best dress. From her instructions, the maids guessed that “This must be a critical moment for Her Highness”, and they redoubled their efforts. Of course, there were questions of “Who’s the lucky man?” and it spread like wildfire through the maids’ network of “who’s who of where”.

However, all of their guesses fell short of the mark. What Pina intended to do fell into the “other” category. If the maids knew the truth, they would probably be disgusted instead. An abortionist might be summoned and she might be imprisoned in her room with a loyal maid for the rest of her days. Therefore, Pina did not tell anyone about the person in question. After preparing herself, she left her residence.

And then, she ended up hugging her knees on a bed in the Western Palace.

Shandy’s report told of a Dark Elf girl who gave of her wealth and her body to look for help, but who was rejected. It also painted a heroic picture of a man who sacrificed everything, up to his life for friendship.

Pina was envious and jealous of them from the bottom of her heart. She was a highly fortunate woman, but she still fell far short of them.

“Am I not even worth bedding, nii-sama?”

Consumed by despair and weakness, the Imperial Princess Pina Co Lada broke down into tears.

“Your Highness the Prince Regent, it’s been a long time. You look well,” said the man dressed like a merchant, who was kowtowing before Zorzal.

Clearly, he had been enjoying heavy meals every day, given that he was so fat that his chin had fused with the rest of his body. In addition, his limbs looked so tiny that it made people feel that he would roll away if pushed.

A wave of frustration washed over Zorzal as he saw that disgusting fat body, and he let his displeasure show on his face as he spoke in an annoyed tone:

“To hell with looking well! Are you implying I’m glad that my Father the Emperor is in his sickbed?”

“That, that was not at all my intention and I apologize! Your servant humbly apologizes for not detecting your Highness’ heartache at this development... although the inauguration of the Regency is truly a matter for happiness. Please accept this specially prepared gift.”

“Is that so. Then, put it over there.”

The guest wiped away the cold sweat which had suddenly formed on his face, and nervously placed a small yet heavy-looking wooden box among the small mountain of other presents in the corner of the office.

“What a majestic sight. Although, when you pile them up, is it not unclear who gave which gift?”

“Are you worried that your painstakingly-prepared present will be forgotten? It’s fine. My secretary is very efficient. She’s memorized them all. Tyuule, introduce yourself.”

Tyuule stood at a fixed position in Zorzal’s office, and she dipped her head. She seemed to be taking some sort of shorthand as the quill pen in her right hand raced over the parchment on the board in her left hand.

“Is this Tyuule-sama? She is as beautiful as the rumors say. Pleased to meet you, my name is Maruki.”

“And then that’s my head manservant, Nei.”

Beside Tyuule was an unassuming man in an elegant outfit, who looked to be in his forties or fifties and stood ramrod straight.

“Nei-sama, I’m pleased to make your acquaintance.”

The head manservant graciously acknowledged him with a nod.

“Then, what do you want today? I doubt you’re here just to deliver a celebratory present.”

“Indeed. I pray your Highness the Prince Regent will show your favor to the Maruki Consortium and make us the Imperial Household’s official supplier of goods.”

“What, the news is out already? It seems your ears are fairly useful.”

“Our eyes and ears are very sensitive. We trust your Highness intends to revamp everything.”

“Hm, so your senses are keen and you’re observant too. Indeed, I do intend to make a fresh start. Because of that, I need to change my suppliers one by one. I want fresh people, with fresh attitudes.”

“We at the Maruki Chamber of Commerce approve of your Highness’ considerations. If we are fortunate enough to receive your imprimatur, we shall aid your Highness’ policies with all our might.”

“Yes, yes, I know what you want to say. That’s all for today, I’m busy...”

“In, indeed. I once more tender my sincerest apologies for not noticing. I have wasted enough of your valuable time.”

In accordance with Zorzal’s directions, Tyuule approached the office doors with beautiful footsteps and opened the

door for the merchant. She even smiled to him. Of course, that expression meant “Please leave quickly.”

The merchant smiled back stiffly, and then nervously fled Zorzal’s presence. Tyuule watched him leave, and then muttered to herself.

“That one’s no good.”

Tyuule looked exceptionally charming as she scratched her head with the hand holding her quill pen.

“Indeed. The fact that people like that are spreading all over the place is the fault of the previous Emperors. However, people like that will not be allowed to run free in my Empire. While he’s very perceptive, I don’t need bribery or the like. I doubt someone like him deals honestly. People like that are to be forbidden entry. Got it?”

“Understood,” Tyuule replied as she scribbled something onto the parchment with a *karikari* sound.

As he observed the two of them, the head manservant Nei decided to draw on his great stores of experience and warned:

“Your Highness, while I thoroughly agree with your reasoning, I feel that a massive, sudden change will plunge the palace into chaos. How about a slight readjustment first? It is important to sort matters in order of priority. We

will take care of the important things first and worry about less important things later, and then the situation will clear up. Alleviating chaos is part of the duties of this office.”

“It’s fine. Chaos is what I want.”

“This... may I ask how putting the palace into chaos is beneficial?”

“Nei, you are a mere servant, so you cannot understand the finer points of bureaucracy. I intend to play the fool for a while and observe the court officials. In addition, there is a truth I will tell you.”

“What kind of truth is it?”

“In a vast nation like the Empire, the bureaucrats develop their individual habits, appearance, rules and so on, to the point where they are immune even to changes in policy. The previous Emperors feared to touch this system. However, though the Emperor can decree or the Senate can make rulings, it is these people who actually carry out their directions. Therefore, in the process of executing their orders, they take their fellows into consideration and alter the final product into something which looks like the intended article but which is utterly worthless. Still, this is only possible with a healthy bureaucracy. In a chaotic situation like this, they will not have the freedom to modify

my dictates, and they will be forced to swallow them whole.”

“However, will not these days of panic lead to nothing meaningful being done?”

“Isn’t sorting out these circumstances the job of the ministers?”

“Even so, in the current confusion, the task of sorting things out will not be simple.”

“It’s fine. All they need to do is neatly resolve what happens amidst this chaos. I want things to be simple and clean, an efficient state of affairs with no clutter.”

There was a knocking on the door. Tyuule opened it to welcome the caller.

The next visitor was Advocate-General Rufrus.

“The Senate rejected the special legislation for *oprichnina* which I submitted by the command of Your Highness. The reasons given was that the charge of ‘flouting Imperial authority’ was far too vague and there were also whispers that ‘even the pro-war faction might be indicted by this’.”

“What?! Did I not make myself clear?!”

Zorzal grabbed the scroll case and opened up the bill.

“Hm, what to do. An excessively strict definition will lead to a harsh law that leaves a lot of people open to being accused of treason.”

“To think this was the cause of dispute in the Senate. Can we not push it through forcefully?”

“If we do that, it will only deepen the Senators’ unease. More importantly, there are several officials who are trying to push us into negotiating with Nihon for certain items.”

“Yes, what a shame. Still, it must be those people who were bought off and corrupted by gifts so they would interfere in the diplomatic process.”

“So what should we do?”

As she heard Zorzal muttering to himself, Tyuule timidly volunteered an answer:

“Your Highness. How about changing the definition of ‘flouting Imperial authority’ to a simple ‘those whose actions impede his Majesty’s policies’?”

“Actions that impede policies...?”

“Mm. This way, most of the Senators will not oppose it. Though it may be rude, they cannot do anything about it.”

“Interfere... however, people who have differing opinions will live in fear.”

The *oprichnina* legislation was intended to cover treasonous behavior against the Empire. In other words, it targeted most of the members of the pro-peace faction. The question now was the definition of treason. If one defined it as “actions which impeded policy”, then it might lead to people being unable to voice dissenting opinions at all. This was the beginning of a slippery slope that ended with ‘You disagreed with me, therefore you’re guilty. The sentence is death!’”

Of course, if he did that, all his efforts and his public opinion would go down the drain. This was the opposite of what Zorzal’s ideal scenario. What Zorzal envisioned was a Senate whose members advised the Emperor of their own accord and debated for the welfare of the country. Certainly, he could get a lot more people to work by castigating them, but such action ran counter to Zorzal’s dream.

In order to push Zorzal to a decision, Rufrus stepped forward.

“We’ve prepared the draft for the bill...”

Deep in thought, Zorzal did not question Rufrus and simply nodded.

“Just leave it here, give me more time to think. After that, we’ll let the Senate move on it again.”

Just then, a voice came from the door.

“Forgive me for disturbing you during your work.”

Zorzal said, “Come in”, and in response, Furuta the chef entered.

“I apologize for making you wait for lunch... shall I come back later?”

“No, I’ll have it now. Frankly speaking, it’s been a while, so just put it here.”

Zorzal allowed Furuta to put his lunch on his desk.

Once Furuta entered, Rufrus retreated from the office. However, Tyuule said, “Please wait” and held him back. After that, she spoke to Zorzal, who had already transferred his attention to his food:

“Your Highness, Advocate-General Rufrus is quite busy. If this keeps up, it will hinder him in the execution of his duties.”

“That’s true. After all, Rufrus also has to command the people who will carry out the *oprichnina*. What shall I do about this?”

“Please allow me to handle the task of communication. This way, we will not need to keep summoning Rufrus-sama.”

“Is that so. Thank you Tyuule, you’ve been a great help.”

Zorzal nodded, and handed the task to Tyuule.

“Then we’ll do that. Rufrus.”

The Advocate-General replied: “Yes, understood,” and left.

After a while, Nei spoke:

“Your Highness. Lunch should be had in the dining hall. Eating in a place like this ill-befits your position.”

“Hmph, why do I have to keep shifting around just for lunch? I’m very busy.”

“However, eating in an appropriate place makes the food taste better. In addition, it does not compromise your image and authority. One must appear dignified as a ruler.”

“Is that so? Then I’ll change some other day. This is a daily occurrence, after all, so there’s no need for all that pomp

and circumstance. Besides, Furuta's food tastes good even if you eat it here."

"My thanks, your Highness."

The head manservant looked disapprovingly at the hastily-hired chef. He seemed to be scolding Furuta with his eyes for not agreeing with him.

However, Zorzal simply said, "Come, time to eat," and opened up the lunchbox on his desk.

"Oh? And what have we here?"

"It is a sandwich of roasted meat in grain buns, known as a hamburger. It is flavored with your Highness' preferred seasonings and served with vegetables. You hold it like so, and take great bites of it. Then you add the included vegetable sauces to taste..."

Nei sighed as he saw this.

"It is quite unrefined of one to consume lunch in a place of work."

"But it's so good. This suits me perfectly. Furuta, pay his mumblings no heed and make me more of these. Got it?"

"Yes. I understand."

Beside him, Tyuule was helping herself to a hamburger as well. It was quite adorable how she took small bites out of it, the way a small animal would eat a fruit.

“Come to think of it, Furuta, how about officially becoming a palace chef? It just so happens the head chef position is open. Of course, it’s not left open for you specifically, but I honestly cannot think of a better man for the job.”

“I am very grateful for your offer. However, I have a dream of my own.”

“I know, you want to own your own shop, right?”

A dispirited Zorzal sighed deeply.

“Still, it’s such a small dream. I feel like scolding you.”

“That is quite a rude thing to say.”

“No, it’s fine. Frankly speaking, I feel it’s good that a minor character can retain his pride. Never mind, I get it. Go chase your dream. But before that, stay by my side. All the other chefs pale in comparison to your skills. Got that?”

“Yes, your Highness.”

“However, you’ve made a serious mistake, Furuta.”

“What, what mistake did I make?”

“You didn’t make enough of this marvellous dish! You’ll need several times more than this to sate *my* appetite!”

Zorzal glanced into the box, at the hill of hamburgers as he said this. If that was not enough, how much could he eat?

“I understand. Then, I shall go heat the rest up now. It should be ready soon.”

“...Cheh. That means you were prepared for this.”

“Yes. I know your Highness is a big eater, and if I brought them all out at once, the last few would get cold. I thought it would be better to leave a few until they were needed and then serve them hot.”

“Ah! Truly a remarkable chap, no matter how I look at you. I understand, now go get the rest ready while I’m eating. That’s right, Tyuule, you go with him too, and see if Furuta really does have more laid up in store. Also, something might happen if he’s too rushed.”

“Ah? Yes!”

Tyuule had been steadily gnawing her burger into a crescent shape — accompanied by “om nom nom” noises — and she was clearly reluctant to leave it.

“Tyuule-san, please hurry, his Highness eats quickly, so it’s important that we return soon.”

“Y-yes!”

Zorzal had a displeased look on his face, but he laughed happily. Tyuule and Furuta took that as the starter’s pistol for them to jog toward the kitchen from the office.

As Tyuule panted, she asked:

“Aren’t, aren’t you afraid of his Highness? Just now, you could have died.”

“I can’t say I’m not afraid, but...”

Furuta could not do or say anything which involved lying about food. Not even if someone else said things which forced him to leave the family restaurant he had been groomed to inherit, left him homeless due to wicked rumors, and finally forced him to join the JSDF.

Therefore, he felt that if he had angered Zorzal and been forced to flee, it would have been fine. Or rather, he wanted to make him angry and terminate this assignment quickly.

For people in this world, it was difficult for someone to run to a place where Zorzal could not reach. However, Furuta had been prepared for that eventuality. If he called for help,

a helicopter would come and recover him, and once he went through the Gate, Zorzal would not be able to touch him. Therefore, he acted without fear, but that only served to impress Tyuule, who did not know this.

“To think the dream of someone with such vision and ability would be just to open his own shop... I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that.”

“I guess you can’t make sense of that, given that you serve the Prince Regent. However, to me, a shop is something like my own castle, or my own country.”

“And you want to become the king of your own little kingdom?”

“Yes. And the people who come before me to eat shall be my subjects.”

“How fortunate your citizens must be. After all, they have good food to eat. However, don’t you think the people are irrational and prideful beings? In the end, they’ll treat you coldly. Sometimes, people do bite the hand that feeds them.”

“Then, as long as I satisfy everyone’s appetites, it won’t be a problem. Otherwise, the people will flee elsewhere and the shop will be forced to close.”

This is what the Third generation head didn't understand. Furuta felt that he was very foolish.

“So you feel that it's the king's fault that his people betray him?”

Tyuule had stopped for some reason.

Furuta thought “what is it” as he turned to look at Tyuule's face.

“I think neither side is in the wrong.”

“You, you actually think that way... so you intend to be a king who is loved by his people?”

“That would be nice.”

Furuta had drawn ahead of Tyuule, who was a little behind him, watching his back.

Tyuule mused that many of Zorzal's followers wore fancy clothes, twisting their bodies to bear their weight. Yet the body of Furuta — who did not go out of his way to curry favor with the strong — was ramrod straight. He was not very tall, and he was dressed in dirty work clothes., Even so, why was it that she thought she could see something like a light coming from his back?

Elsewhere, Zorzal was busy munching on burgers as he scrolled through the files the Advocate General had brought him. He was signing off on amended documents.

“Hm? Where’s the draft for the *oprichnina* bill? Where’s it gone?”

He looked on the desk, he looked under Furuta’s lunch basket, but found nothing. Nor was it under his desk. He searched everywhere but could not find it.

The head manservant Nei was puzzled by these actions, and asked:

“Has something happened, your Highness?”

“No, it seems Rufrus forgot to give me an important document.”

“Still, did you not hand the matter of communication to Tyuule in the end?”

“Ah, come to think of it, I did leave it to her. All right, I’ll move on to the next file. Hold this.”

And so, the *oprichnina* bill, in Tyuule’s hands and without Zorzal’s knowledge, was slotted into the “re-proposal” box.



Chapter 5

The Academy City of Londel

The shroud of night fell over the silent Reader's Rest.

From the outside, one could still see two or three lit windows on the side of the inn, but they were the exception — for the most part, the windows of the four-story, 40-room inn were dark. However, this did not mean that the guest rooms were unoccupied. In fact, most of the rooms were taken. However, lamp oil was not cheap, so they were used to sleeping early to avoid wastage.

Rather than rely on a feeble light to exorcise the night of its terrors, everyone chose to flee into the comfort of sleep instead.

However, when one turned to look at the buildings on the other side of the street, their windows were still lit up.

Those lights belonged to scholars who were too immersed in their research to spare time for sleep. In contrast to the line of blazing wildfire which raced through the streets of Akusho, they were a soft, gentle glow.

“Ah, the skyline of an old city. I'll never tire of it, no matter how many times I see it.”

How many days had they stayed here now?

The man looked down on the streets of Londel from one of its run-down old buildings.

The Reader's Rest was located at the foot of the mountain, and from there one could gaze all the way up the slopes, to the mountain's peak.

This sort of scenery was part of the charm of old cities. And indeed, Londel was an old city with the weight of history behind it, so it was not wrong to feel that way. However, unlike in Tokyo, Nara and other sightseeing spots — where old buildings were empty shells good only for tourism — the buildings here were all being fully utilized. The lights in the night skyline were all put to practical use, and there was a certain beauty to this lack of false ornamentation.

The girl who stood beside the man responded:

“Indeed. These lights are not like the brightness of Tokyo. Feeble flames flicker on the candlestands. Under their weak light, the apprentices frantically scribble with their pens. With the flame of wisdom to banish the darkness ignorance, they combine their individual progress as they delve ever forward, exploring with their hands into uncharted territory.”.

A rustle of clothing could be heard from the girl under the covers. She reached out to grab the man's sleeve. It would seem she was naked under that pure white bedsheet.

“Wait... what are you doing?”

“Father, shouldn’t you be coming soon? I’m already prepared.”

Behind Itami and Lelei were Tuka (who was looking around while peering through an infrared night vision scope, wearing only a T-shirt), Rory (whose cheeks were puffed up in annoyance), Yao (who was wearing a sports bra and a pair of bermudas, and had a clueless look on her face), as well as a still-sleepy Shandy in a kanto.

(TL note: kanto were mentioned way back in v1; it was Lelei’s outfit when fleeing Coda Village)

“Yup, I’m coming now. I only asked because I’m trying hard not to die.”

Itami was dressed in an olive drab T-shirt and his BDU slacks. He idly patted the rifle slung over his right shoulder, felt its hard metal parts and its sanded wooden stock while Lelei made the bed under her. She looked different from how she usually did, probably because she was barefoot, in a baggy tank top and wearing hot pants. She went on to wake the sleepers around them.

“If I mention my mentor’s name, it should reduce the chances of us being harassed.”

Was that person really as great as she imagined?

Lelei replied to Itami: “If that happens, won’t it all be over?” as he loaded a pair of taped-together magazines, then covered the metal parts of the rifle in black vinyl tape so that there would be no sound when they touched each other. In addition, he did not fully set the safety lever to [S] once he finished loading it, but left it halfway to the [F] position. This way, he could quickly switch from the “safe” to “fire” positions with a fingertip. Technically speaking, he should have set it all the way to “safe” to observe proper firearms safety, but the difficulty of readying the Type 64 rifle was a flaw in its design.

“Well, it would be best if the assassins were willing to give up, but that’s unlikely. So we’ve got to do this.”

Using the Reader’s Rest as a base of operations, Itami and the others had been wandering the area around Londel every day for the past two weeks. There was a poor village about half a day’s journey by car away, and the Belnago Shrine was about two day’s journey away.

They had many objectives here, but the most important one was Itami’s resource prospecting. In addition, the way they left almost after arriving at any given area was also related to shaking off the assassins after Lelei, so they were killing two birds with one stone. No matter how skilled the assassins were, they could not catch up with the HMOV’s movements.

Still, they could only keep this up for a while.

No matter how far they ran, they still had to come back to Londel. The reason why Gray and Shandy knew to find Itami and the others here was because Panache from Arnus had spread the news, and the assassins obviously knew this as well.

As Lelei said, the fact that she was taking part in the conference meant that even if they knew the assassins would strike, they would still have to meet it head-on.

“But, if the assassins do the same thing next time...”

“If that happens, we’ll still have bought you the time to make your presentation at the conference, right?”

With that in mind, their present conditions and fighting power were most ideal for them.

They had Itami, Rory, Tuka and Yao here. Gray — who was currently in the room beside them — was here as well. This was the perfect place to welcome any assassins.

“Eh?! I’m not counted part of your fighting strength? I’m older than Lelei-san. Do I look so unreliable?”

Shandy — a cute, gentle-looking little brown-haired girl — tried to change the others' perception of her. Itami felt bad about having her follow along, but in the end he relented.

“Shh! It's as Itami-dono said, someone's coming up the stairs.”

“You should tell us this sort of thing earlier!”

“Sorry. I only just heard it myself.”

Gray, who had his ear plastered to the door as he listened for people outside, gave the signal that someone was coming. Itami and the others concealed themselves in the various corners of the room, as they had all arranged.

They hid in the darkness and held their breath.

They heard something rolling along the ground.

It sounded like a coin that had fallen out of a pocket. The inn rooms were large and there was little for it to bump into, so the sound of the coin rolling around went on for a long time.

“.....”

“.....”

Finally, the rolling stopped, and silence resumed.

An atmosphere of uneasiness seemed to spread through the room.

Someone said: “S-sorry. My bad...”

And then the apology was muffled by something.

Soon, Gray had the measure of what was happening outside. He said, “They’re coming, four of them,” before moving away from the door and blending into the shadows.

This time, the room was truly silent.

Now, they could see the shapes of several people quietly ascending the stairs of the Reader’s Rest.

Their number was exactly as Gray said — there were four of them.

They studied the figures closely. They wore black clothing which concealed the shapes of their bodies, and it was impossible to make out their gender.

After climbing the wooden staircase, they advanced toward the corridor.

There was the sound of something scraping on the corridor, and the silhouettes suddenly stopped.

“Shh!”

The person who pressed his finger to his lips seemed to be scolding one of his subordinates. The fact that they approached their target without any hesitation made them seem even more like amateurs.

The shadows crowded around the door, and then quietly turned the doorknob.

The well-maintained door did not creak when opened. The four shapes simultaneously went to the beds and drew their swords.

“.....!”

Standing on the carpets beside the beds, they gripped their swords and thrust them down with all their strength. Three sounds of thumping and stabbing echoed through the room.

“Did you do it?”

“I did it, we did it!”

Their cheers filled the room. However, they was cut short the sound of something metallic falling and rolling on the bed.

“What a shame, at least you tried.”

Those words were accompanied by an explosion which was 160 decibels in volume and a flash of 6 million candelas in intensity. The light filled the darkness of the room in an instant — humans, furniture, everything was swallowed by the brilliant white light.

The shapes — who had looked directly at the flashbang — were blinded into dizziness by the flash and their ears rang like they were in the heart of a storm. Some of them stood in place, reeling from the shock, while others covered their eyes and groped around in an attempt to find a way out.

However, they could not move calmly, since they were drowning in the vortex of fear which came from losing both their eyesight and hearing at the same time. Frightened by the sudden darkness, they fell to the ground and rolled around, bumping into each other and screaming in terror.

“Alright... heading your way.”

“好了，去你那里了。”

With great effort, Rory grunted:

“Benh!”

“Banh!”

“Dosu!”

“Pesh!”

She wielded her halberd with her eyes closed, and neatly knocked out the assassins.

The lingering smoke from the flashbang rose into the air. Itami was concerned that the flashbang might have ignited anything flammable in the room. Fortunately, the wooden floor and the beds were only a little singed, and there was no sign that a fire had started.

Lelei and Tuka lit the room's lampstands with magic.

“My eyes, my eyes~”

He had repeatedly warned the group to “plug your ears, turn your face away and close your eyes, do not look directly at the flash”. However, the brown-headed girl had looked straight at the flashbang, which was why she was rolling around on the ground. There was nothing they could do but wait for her to recover on her own.

Beside her, Yao was on all fours with her butt perked up into the air, taking a pose which would arouse any man as she crawled around, looking for something.

“Where did it go?”

“Yao, did you drop something?”

“I’m looking for the lucky charm her Holiness bestowed upon me... ah, found it!”

She had to stick her shoulder under the bed and feel around with her long arms before coming back out with a brass 5 yen coin.

“Before getting this, I didn’t find it strange when all sorts of bad things happened to me, such as getting hurt or splashed with water. Ah, in her Holiness’ words, it seems to be a good luck charm.”

Itami could not help but think, *5 yen is pretty cheap for that sort of thing*. However, this might be what they meant by “faith can move mountains”. It certainly seemed real enough to her. (TL Note: 5 yen is pronounced “go-en”, which sounds the same as “connections”. Basically it’s a good luck charm for Yao to make friends. This is covered in the manga’s minotaur arc.)

“Why not run a string through the hole in the center and tie it around your neck?”

“Ah, I’ll do that.”

Yao clutched the 5 yen coin tightly as she said so. She seemed very happy.

“All right, the surroundings didn’t catch fire. Still, I want to have Tuka and Rory stand guard and monitor our

surroundings. Gray-san, what do you think, are they still alive?”

“Don’t worry, they’re still breathing!”

The invading assassins had been knocked out by Rory’s halberd and now lay on the ground. Gray went over each of them, tying their hands behind their backs with leather cords.

Yao ran one of those cords through the hole in the center of her 5-yen coin. Gray felt a bit depressed; he had come to help, but in the end this was all he could do.

“Tuka?”

Tuka was watching the buildings outside, a composite bow in hand.

“Just now it seemed as though there was someone drawing close, Father.”

“Got it, just remain alert... what kind of assassins are these people anyway? They look kind of young, don’t they?”

As they turned one of them over, they discovered a huge mark on his face.

It was a large bruise from where the halberd had smitten him across the face. It seemed difficult for anyone to live with an injury like that. Still, he seemed vaguely familiar.

Rory and Itami had the same misgivings.

“Hmm? That kid looks like one of the boys working at this inn.”

“Ehh?!”

They hurriedly went for a candle, and took a look at the faces of the other three.

It was the middle of the night, and the owner of the Reader’s Rest, Hamal, was sleeping comfortably on his bed when he was suddenly awoken.

“Ehhh~ Damn it, do you know what time it is?”

Due to his long experience at receiving guests, he masked his desire to shout in frustration with a charming smile and opened the door.

“Dear guest, may I know what this is all this about? After all, it is the middle of the night.”

He asked that question without revealing the hidden annoyance in the depths of his heart. However, when he looked closely at the caller, he saw a Dark Elf, a female Dark Elf, who radiated a mature woman's charm.

It was the middle of the night. And now, a woman had come to a man's room.

Could, could it be? She was looking for a one-night stand?

Ever since his wife had died, Hamal had taken the act of sleeping alone to be natural, so he could not help but fantasize about such a lewd encounter. However, the words which flowed from that woman's pale red lips made the somewhat excited Hamal's pinkish ears blanch a pale white.

"Ehhhhh?!"

Which was: that the inn's staff had tried to attack their guests.

"Ah, could it be that our boys did that..."

This was as much his faith in his own workers as it was an attempt to deny reality. Therefore, he decided that it would be better to see it with his own eyes.

After entering the guest room, the sight of his own people on the ground with their hands tied behind their backs made Hamal collapse onto his haunches.

“You, you, you lot... what have you done?”

He did not even have the strength to get angry.

“What have you done?!... We’re finished. This inn is finished!”

Looking around, it would seem his cry had awakened the guests around them, and they were moving around and peeking at them from the corridor. Hiding what had happened tonight would probably be impossible. The rumors would race down the merchant district in an instant. This was an inn favored by travellers, and they would spread the news throughout the entire city. If that happened, the flow of clients here would end immediately. Anyone would have to think twice about staying in an inn where its staff attacked its own guests. The loss of faith in an inn’s ability to host guests could be said to be its death knell.

The boys looked fearfully at Hamal.

He did not know what kind of excuse they would give, but the first thing they said was, “We were tricked.”

“Tell me about it.”

At this point, Hamal was on the verge of a mental breakdown.

It was common to be angry when one's expectations were betrayed. Therefore, when one gave up on everything, when one expected nothing of the other party, there would be nothing to be angry about.

The boys replied:

“We heard—”

“—That her Holiness was fake—”

“—That she was a vicious killer who planned to kill all the merchants in this inn—”

“—Even that she was being chased by bounty hunters.”

Everyone was so shocked by these words that they could say nothing.

When they put together the words of the four of them, the story they got was that Rory was fake, that she was a fraudster who planned to target the guests at this inn. Also, that she was a bounty target.”

“Who do you think will believe you?”

“The thing was, we saw the bounty poster, and we were paid gold coins, so we wanted to protect the guests... that was what we thought.”

“And, and you lot didn’t even think it was strange?”

There was no way to tell if a bounty notice was real or fake. It was very simple for someone to draw on a parchment and make up a story. In addition, giving out money without any prior accomplishments was very generous and very suspicious.

“That person seemed to know what he was talking about and he gave us gold coins, and he trusted us, and he seemed to be hiding some kind of guilt, which meant, he thought...”

“So you lot will suspect a copper coin but let a gold coin go unchallenged? Are you stupid?”

The lads had nothing to say and lowered their heads. Hamal sighed and looked to the ceiling.

“And then, you snuck into the guests’ rooms?”

“We didn’t do nothing.”

“Yeah, we were caught before we could do anything.”

They said that, but a quick look at the beds revealed the swords embedded into the mattress. There was no way they could claim they had not done anything. This was not conspiracy to murder, but attempted murder.

Under the eyes of Itami — who represented the other guests — they were hard-pressed to explain themselves. And of course, the gray-faced Hamal was looking even more ill at ease.

“There’s a world of difference between saying you didn’t manage to do anything and you didn’t want to do anything.”

The boys apologized in earnest — “We, we’re sorry,” — after Tuka scolded them.

As she saw their earnest expressions, she thought, *they must have been good kids under normal circumstances.*

Before that, Gray had been quietly listening to the punks try and talk their way out of it. He said, “Yes, that’s right, it must be like that,” and nodded.

“The person who uses these methods is called the Piper.”

“The Piper? Who’s that?”

“Sometimes he’s a human male, or an Elf girl, or even a Hag, but his true identity is unknown. This guy is an expert

at manipulating the human heart, and he does things like turning little girls who wouldn't even harm a fly into assassins that poison food and drinks, or making those elderly people with stiff backs, the kind who have trouble walking down the stairs, stab you in the back. Unless you take down the man himself, the assassins won't stop coming."

"How troublesome."

Hamal edged closer toward Gray.

"But, but how can he make ordinary people kill others? If these people weren't mentally unstable to begin with, I have no idea how he could turn them into murderers."

"Indeed, killing is a taboo, but that line of thinking is just like a lock. With the right key, one can undo that lock in one's heart without much difficulty. For instance, we knights and soldiers can easily kill people if our superiors command it."

Hamal's face turned pale as he heard this. If one considered killers to be mentally unstable, was he not implying that soldiers and watchmen were mentally unstable as well?

"Ahhh~ I deeply apologize for my poor choice of words. I beg your pardon for my carelessness."

“No, no, if you are all just regular citizens, I won’t mind.”

Gray did not seem to mind much as he continued speaking.

“Owner. Did you know that if I did not kill anyone, the laws would not find me guilty?”

“R-Really?”

“The law states, ‘a murderer must be punished’, but if there’s a suitable mitigating factor, the punishment will be appropriately reduced. The easiest way to absolve one of guilt for murder is when one does so to protect himself from being killed by a murderer. There are people who will harm others for all sorts of nonsensical reasons, and similarly, there will be those who will believe lies to fearlessly protect themselves or their families. Anyone with any common sense will easily realize that there are many circumstances under which one man might kill another. The Piper is an assassin, so perhaps he has some kind of belief and sense of righteousness that drives him to make people kill each other. He quietly tells an easily influenced girl to do it for her lover. He tells an old man that his son has been cheated by some cruel person. In my humble opinion, the desire these lads had to protect the guests was used by him... or perhaps they thought we were cold-blooded murderers or something similar. In any case, they swallowed that particular pill and did it because they

wanted to protect the guests who were staying here. And then, after playing on the boys' youthful sense of justice and their professionalism, they stopped thinking and drew their swords... at least, that's what I think happened."

As the boys heard this, they began nodding one after the other.

"Then, tell us, what did the man who lied to you look like?"

The boys answered in unison:

"He felt like a kind and gentle person."

"He was very tall, and seemed very generous."

"He must have looked like a hero when he was young, and as an older man he looked quite dignified."

"He was a human male."

This was the result of combining what the four of them had said.

About ten days ago, they had gone to tavern after they had finished work. After getting their fortunes told by a travelling diviner, they helped themselves to drink and a hearty meal.

Then, they heard someone say “Excuse me, are you workers at the Reader’s Rest?” and then the man who had just come in greeted them.

That man had a refined look about him as he smiled, and he seemed like the sort who was good with words.

“He was intense, yet generous. He treated us to drinks, but admonished “don’t drink too much when you’re still young”. He also paid close attention to our stories about the girls we liked and whom we spoke with.”

Soon enough, the lads were finished talking, and the man began speaking.

The man said: “My job is not one that I can take pride in, like yours are. What I do is clear the streets of their trash and refuse...” In other words, he captured criminals, and occasionally he would be greatly rewarded for it.

The man told them of the things he had seen and done.

The boys heard of the suffering of the victims he had encountered, and felt anger as they heard of the evil methods of the villains he had seen. They cheered when he told of how he brought those villains down, and the heartfelt thanks of the victims moved the boys to tears, like a drama series.

After that, every time the boys went to the tavern, they drank and listened to the bounty hunter tell his stories. And then, after they had meet him several times, the topic went to the mark this bounty hunter was chasing — a group of conmen.

He spoke of a gang of crooks, one that had cheated many traders and wiped out their fortunes, to the point where they killed themselves after going bankrupt. The families who survived them had gone through much hardship as well.

“Then... what methods did they use to deceive people?”

“I can’t say that. However, all of these traders were forced into bankruptcy and then suicide, while their families were sold into slavery to pay off their debts. Therefore, I will never forgive those guys.”

“Then why not share their methods? If someone had done it sooner, then wouldn’t a lot of people have been saved?”

“That would be very dangerous. These tricksters are proud fellows, and they’ll blame their failures on other people. For instance, if negotiations stopped halfway because the other party sensed a con and ran away, they would hunt down and kill that person because they were angry at the other side fleeing. Therefore, those conmen are very dangerous.

Frankly speaking, people like that prefer making their money in mining towns like these.”

And then, the man said:

“Right now, in order to save the people they have hurt, I would like to capture these five before they can find another victim. If possible, I’d like to capture them unhurt. However, I can’t prepare for that. That said, they have bounties on their heads, so it’s okay if they’re brought in dead or alive as long as someone else doesn’t do it.”

That gang of tricksters was made up of four women and one man.

One of them was an impostor of the demigod Rory. Another was a Rurudo girl. Two of them were an Elf and a Dark Elf.

“If people like that live around the Reader’s Rest, you need to tell me. I’m no match for them by myself, but don’t worry, I’ll find a way to show you...”

The man had a determined look on his face as he spoke to the boys.

“Actually, there’s been a bunch of people exploring around the local mines,” the boys said.

The boys then described what happened after that, and then the events from just now had taken place

Hamal looked at the boys' faces and asked, "Is that so, you lot? Is that really it?"

What they had done was unforgivable. However, he could not reproach them for thinking like that. After all, Hamal was the one who had fostered that attitude in them through his daily lectures.

Their motivation had been the safety of the customers, and it had been fuelled by their youthful enthusiasm. The mistake had been the methods they had chosen to do so. In this way, they had been led astray by flowery words.

Hamal pressed his head to the ground and spoke.

"Your Holiness, and everyone else. I wish to bear the punishment of these boys in their place, in my capacity as their employer. Please direct your displeasure to me. Though there may be no future for the Reader's Rest, I hope the same will not apply to these lads. I beseech you to forgive them."

"Hamal-san!"

The boys were shouting, "Please wait," "Why are you doing this for us" and so on. The fact was that they wished to be punished for their own wrongdoings. They could not allow

their employer to suffer for their mistakes because he had done nothing wrong. All he wanted was to protect the reputation of the Reader's Rest.

“What should we do?”

Itami and the others looked at each other. Eventually, Rory smiled bitterly, and as she strode forward, she made her pronouncement.

“I forgive them. However, as the owner of this inn, you'd best educate them about where they went wrong.”

Since Rory had spoken, there was nothing else for the others to say.

The other guests — who had been crowding around to watch the proceedings — nodded in approval of Rory's judgement. They were not aware of the exact motivations behind the boys' actions. On that part, all they knew was that “The Piper is an evil man”, and that they despised his methods.

Itami himself had his doubts. What was the justice system of this place like? They could be forgiven just because nobody minded. However, actually begging for forgiveness made the prospect sound worse. In any case, it was a very troublesome system.

“My sincerest thanks for your forgiveness.”

Following Hamal's lead, the boys lowered their heads in apology as well, though they were also delighted to be forgiven.

"It is indeed disrespectful to yourselves to have to stay in an inn like this. I shall immediately arrange alternative accommodations for yourselves, but may I know if there is any particular inn which your Holiness desires to occupy? It is fine, we shall prepare a better room for you than this one."

Rory glanced over to Lelei, communicating something with her eyes before she replied:

"There's no need for that. People who have been tricked once tend to grow, and I'm looking forward to that. So this would actually be the safest place."

The way the boys looked at Lelei seemed to say that they would not be deceived again.

"Therefore, we'll spend the night here.."

"I, I understand. Before your journey ends, this inn will serve you with its heart and soul," Hamal said while bowing several times as he backed out of the room.

After the boys were freed of their bonds, they followed him out. He said something inaudible to them, and then poked the back of the heads of one of the shorter lads.

At great length, the door closed, and he began explaining the situation to the other guests. It was unclear whether Hamal intended to hide the truth or disclose everything.

“But, those boys, will they really be all right?”

Itami tilted his head to the side and scratched his scalp. Rory reassured him that it was all right, and Lelei helped her explain.

“Gray himself said that breaking the taboo of murder was simple. Everyone in the army is like that — with the appropriate training, they can do all sorts of things which they would normally deem to be forbidden.”

As Lelei mentioned this, Rory, Tuka and Yao nodded. Itami agreed as well; after all he had been through intense training himself, so as long as the order was given, he could kill people regardless of how right or wrong it was. In the key moment, he would forget himself and act. One could say that it was a natural reflex given the events of the Battle of Nijubashi. The fact was that if someone told him to do it, he would, so he did not pay that too much heed.

“Perhaps that man called the Piper is skilled at finding these psychological weaknesses.”

Itami smacked his palm.

“I see, so he brings out the chuunibyou in them. What an ingenious method.”

“Chew-nib-yo?”

“How shall I describe it... they’re people who build their personalities around their thoughts and fantasies.”

“There’s no term like that in the dictionary. I shall memorize that definition for future reference.”

Lelei mumbled an explanation, allowing Itami to continue after being briefly lost for words:

“The people who were tricked by him will end up being tricked again.”

To the Piper, they were rare victims of chuunibyou, and so he might come after them once more.

Itami said, “So you mean, they might forgive him again?” as he watched the complicated expression on Rory’s face.

And so, Rory imagined the Piper going “kukuku” in her mind.

Yao felt miserable. Her hands were stained with guilt, and the desire to atone drove her every day. For all she knew, she might have felt the same way as the boys.

“So, should we use those boys to see if we can get the Piper to show his face again? I don’t have any ideas. What should we do? We could try observing them, but our faces are already known to him.”

“Fortunately, because somebody didn’t turn their face away in time and ended up rolling around on the ground, there’s one person whom they won’t recognize here.”

Itami looked where Lelei’s finger was pointing.

He saw Shandy, who was lying flat on the bed and rubbing her face with a pillow.

On the dawn of the next day, Itami awoke in his room... a storeroom as it turned out.

The word “storeroom” conjured up images of filthy walls and squalid furniture, but the room was not that run-down. If one did not know it was a storeroom, it might have been mistaken for the cheapest room in a business hotel. The furnishings were basic — a bedframe, headboard and chairs — but they looked clean and Itami felt it was still

very comfortable. The room itself was large, the furniture was of a high quality, and with a blanket to cover him, he had no problems getting to sleep.

Several crossbeams ran across the ceiling, and windows in the roof allowed light from the outside to enter. A small, butterfly-like Fairy flitted overhead.

The ceiling beams stretched wide, joining the sloped sides of the roof. This created a large space over his head, and it did not feel cramped in the least. At least that was how he felt when he woke up and saw this for the first time while his mind was still foggy from sleep. The only thing he was certain of was that this was not a JSDF barracks.

While his body and mind were still groggy from waking up, Itami had already dressed himself and put his boots on.

He put the wash basin on the table at the head of the bed, poured water into it from a nearby pot, and then used it to wash his face. Then he clipped the pistol from under his pillow to his belt, opened the door and headed out into the corridor.

He knocked on the door facing his, which led to the girls' room. However, there was no response.

They had probably gotten up and gone for breakfast. While the Japanese might have remained asleep after sunrise, the people of the Special Region typically began their days just

after the sun rose, because work and travel were best done during the daytime.

In fact, by the time he descended the long staircase from the fourth to the first floor, he could already see the travellers gathered for breakfast in the dining room.

The departing travellers paid their lodging fees at the service counters while the inn boys ran around moving luggage as cargo wagons and the like departed. The air was filled with a lively energy. There was no sign of the “this inn is doomed” atmosphere and the customers fleeing that Hamal had feared from last night.

“Ah, good morning, Lord Itami!”

That energetic greeting came from one of the boys who had a large mole under his left eye.

As though this on cue, everyone around him began greeting Itami.

It was not just Hamal and the boys, but even the other guests were calling out to him

A close look revealed that the palm-sized Fairy that looked like a butterfly had her head lowered as she hovered around him.

“Ah, ha, yes... good morning.”

Itami could not help but stop in his tracks, and he returned the greeting despite feeling terribly confused about everything.

What was going on here?

Also, why were they calling him “Lord”?

Under bombardment from the well-meaning gazes all around him, Itami fled for the crowd in front of the dining hall. Then, he found a gap in the mass of people, and positioned himself at the back of the line.

However, the dining hall’s chef roared, “Oi, you can’t stand there!” and glared at him

It would seem he had queued up in the wrong place.

“Ah, yes. Sorry, but where should I line up? There’s no sign saying ‘End of the line’ over here.”

(TL Note: the Japanese actually have signs stating (End of the line) when it comes to long queues.)

“No, that’s not what I mean... you’re different, come over here.”

The chef led Itami over and said, “See, over here!” and sat him down at a table at the center of the dining hall.

There, he saw Rory, Lelei having their breakfast, being served by a palm-sized fairy.

“Ah, good morning.”

“Morning.”

Rory seemed a little out of it this morning. Lelei was as neutral as she always was. Tuka had a very stiff smile on her face. Yao was face down on the table for some reason, muttering “Shame, an eternal shame”.

“So, what’s the matter?”

“Youjy, are you all right?”

“Well, a bunch of people greeted me warmly this morning.”

“Good morning, Father.”

“Oi, oi, Tuka, are you alright?”

“The fairies have been touching me all morning.”

Everyone was assaulted from all sides by greetings, like an encirclement. Fortunately, nobody was rude enough to address them while they were eating, but in their place, people were lining up to meet and greet them. For instance, the group where Itami had been standing earlier.

It was because of them that Itami had been fortunate enough to be led here.

Now, if the group had been full of people that interested Itami, it would have been much better. People like seiyuus, mangakas, people that one would encounter at doujin festivals, holding hands with Rory and the others. That would have pleased him.

“It’s nothing exciting. All they’d get in the end is a number plate.”

Lelei was still narrating events in her neutral, emotionless voice. Although she appeared calm on the outside, there was a ripple of emotion in her heart which only she could feel.

“The hotel’s owner gave a lot of number plates to the queuing people.”

“But why?”

At this, Yao — who had plastered her face against the table — raised her head, revealing her bright red cheeks.

“The postmen delayed by the bridge collapse finally reached last night. The head of the Fire Dragon was hung up in the Imperial Capital, and the news of how you slew the Flame Dragon has made its rounds. Also, the news of

what I did in Arnus was heavily embellished. Ah~ I want to crawl into a hole somewhere...”

Yao blushed as she said that, and went face down onto the table again.

“I feel bad about it too, because I became a burden for you in the process.”

Tuka clasped her hands together and pleaded, “I’m sorry, Father, I’ve disgraced our family name”. And then, the tips of her ears flushed pink, and she laid herself down on the table as well. Naturally, the “father” here was her natural father, Hodryur Marceau.

“Actually, I don’t really like people who take part in dragon hunts for fame and fortune.”

Rory was clearly unhappy about missing out, and she made her displeasure known.

The fact was that the battle with the red and black Young Dragons and Giselle deserved just as much publicity. However, the news of that had not spread very far.

“Still, how did that all get out? People were addressing me as Lord since just now. I forgot how exactly I came to be one...”

They had verified the contents of the rumors, and there was bits of truth mixed into it, though it was still quite detached from reality. While it was understandable that the rumors had been embellished with the imagination, the problem now was how it had gotten out in the first place. To begin with, only a few people in the Empire should have known about this matter.

“It seems the news spread from someone around Pina, so that person should be here by now.”

“Pina doesn’t know that person, so if possible, I hope we can let this matter be.”

“As if I could let this malicious misrepresentation be,” Lelei grumbled.

“How so?”

“They’re saying Lelei dealt the killing blow to the Flame Dragon.”

After hearing that, Rory sighed “Ehhhh~” at Itami.

If one used Gray’s reaction as a benchmark of the reactions of the Empire’s citizenry, it would seem they were more reverent of her than they were shocked or dismayed. *Now who could have encouraged that attitude*, Itami wondered.

The answer to that came from Rory, who was licking her soup spoon in a decidedly unladylike way.

“The people of this country feel like they’re in trouble.”

“They’re at their wits’ end?”

“Indeed. This world has been stagnant for a very long time. The Empire stood above all other nations and maintained order, and the Emperor ruled over all humanity in a similar way. Humans built relations to all the other species, and these relationships have stood for a very long time. More than anyone else, humanity is a species which looks forward to tomorrow. Because of their dreams, they can bear with the unjustness of the present. However, now they feel like they’re locked in their present positions. There’s no more meaning to their labors, and they’ve lost their motivation.”

“Mmm~”

“The Emperors of old used warfare to break through that stasis. They attacked the countries around them, dominated all sorts of species, took new land, expanded their sphere of power, handed out noble titles and built far-reaching roads to declare their glory. However, that was their limit... So when the Gate opened, the Emperor did not think twice and ordered an attack. However, that attack

failed. A sense of unease grew in the people's hearts as they realised they were on the verge of defeat."

"So this is basically hero worship?"

"Indeed. This might be enough to scatter the suffocating atmosphere hanging over the land. And then, they want that hero to live near them. They draw great strength from the presence of that hero, which is why the people of the Empire are going wild over Lelei."

Lelei calmly insisted that she was not an Imperial citizen but a Rurudo. However, only she and the people around her could hear that. Those words did not carry outside the dining hall, drowned out by the people greeting and calling out to her.

Perhaps nobody would care even if Lelei shouted that she was not from the Empire. This was because people saw what they wanted to see, and ignored what they did not want to see.

"Some people are raising altars to Lelei while others are raising knives... I can guess who's doing this. Say, where's Gray-san?"

"He went to get breakfast for Shandy."

Shandy was their ace in the hole against the Piper, given that nobody had seen her face. Thus she had to hide in a

place where the inn boys would not see her. Therefore, she was quietly observing them from the outside, in the darkness. Yes, watching them, all by herself.

When Itami thought about that, he kind of pitied her.

However, the fact was that Shandy was spending her time in an all-night tavern, and she seemed to be getting along quite well with a horse messenger that she met by chance. Given that she had exaggerated the details of the dragon slaying, there was no need to pity her. Rather, it was better to pay her no heed.

“Good morning, everyone. You’ve come.”

This was the inn’s owner, Hamal.

“The culprit is here,” Tuka said.

“I’m like this in the morning because of you,” Yao added.

“The only thing to blame is the speed at which the rumors spread. Indeed, I did help them along, but that was all to protect you.”

“And why is it that spreading these tall tales will protect us?”

Itami was wondering if that plan was actually workable.

“The Piper works by using lies to trick others into killing people. Once your faces and situations are known to everyone, that method will be useless. At the very least, nobody would have a reason to attack the heroes who slew the Flame Dragon, no?”

“Is that really going to help?”

“Your Holiness is right to ask that question. However, the Piper’s secret movements and his actions are now spreading as well, so it will be quite hard for him to make a move. Anyone trying to persuade others with flowery words can be shut up with ‘Ah, you’re lying...’”

“Will that really be all right? What if the boys’ deeds get out?” Tuka asked in a concerned tone.

“I am glad that you all understand. Truly, honesty is the best weapon.”

“—Or you’ve just managed to kill two birds with one stone,” Rory muttered.

“What, I was prepared for this inn to close down from the beginning. This is just a sacrifice I can make to atone for what I did.”

Looking outside, one could see the scarred boy being bullied by the guests. “I won’t be tricked any more,” they

heard him say. Because of these words, Hamal looked over very uneasily.

“Thanks to you, we might not need to close down.”

“It’s a stroke of fortune amidst this calamity.”

“Indeed. All this was because of your magnanimity, your Holiness.”

“If we do this, will Lelei’s presentation be successful?”

However, Itami’s optimism was shattered. Gray shouldered his way out of the wall of humanity.

“Still, this is kind of hard to deal with. If a horse messenger can come over here, that means a different assassin from the Piper might have arrived as well. If he infiltrates the crowd seeking an audience with you, our eyes alone will not be able to find him. At that point, we’ll need to watch our surroundings.

Gray sighed deeply, and then took a seat in an empty chair.

“Boss, before something happens, I want to discuss something with you.”

“This, this... I apologize. It might be best for you to prepare yourselves.”

“No, now that it’s over, it can’t be helped that it got blown up so much. I apologize for lashing out during the course of my duties.”

“That’s right, who might you be?”

It was only natural for Hamal to be suspicious of Gray, who was not a guest of the inn. Though he had not noticed him in the chaos last night, when he met him again today, he had had no recollection of someone like him staying here.

“This one is the helper of one of Imperial Princess’ Pina’s knights. I represent the Empire in welcoming you all to the Imperial Capital.”

“Oho, an invitation from her Highness?”

“Indeed. The fact is that the Empire sees the completion of this great task as a threat to its authority. Her Highness ordered us to extend a sincere invitation to you. At that point, after encountering events like these, we also took on the task of protecting you.”

“Is that so? ...Oi oi, get some breakfast for this knight-sama.”

“Okay~” replied the Fairies on the table.

“Ah, it’s fine. This one has lodged in another inn, and I have already had my breakfast.”

“Then, how about a cup of tea?”

“Thank you, I’ll help myself to one, then.”

Hamal informed his guards as a glass of tea was set before Gray. Once the group had finished breakfast, he wanted this place to become a place for people to gaze upon their heroes. Looking beside the serving boys, they could see the queue of people with numbered plates growing ever further.

Itami and the others felt that it was a good thing that the entrances and exits were not being blocked up. While this allocation of space had been Hamal’s plan, it was much better than being penned into a room surrounded by cheering people.

伊丹他们感觉这手法的好处就是入口处没有被堵塞。大概在哈马尔的隔间中，对于谒见没有任何打算。但是，比起拥挤得进退不得，这种无秩序的欢呼声中，确实好了很多。

“Everyone, we were glad to meet you all. However, the latest we can leave is tomorrow morning. Now that I’ve said that, I can say that I’ll be proud of you wherever you go...”

Of course he could not say it was because he disliked the atmosphere in the room right now.

In the face of the silent Itami and gang, Gray took a cup of cheap tea as payment for his services as a guard before smiling and asking:

“So, has the bridge been fixed already?”

Hamal blinked, as if to say he knew nothing about this.

“At least, the bridge near Galif has been repaired. The messenger came a little late, apparently because the area was flooded. However, it’s not just Galif which was affected, but Motallan and Pylan as well. It will take a few days before things go back to normal over there. It’s terrible, the traders in the Capital are going numb.”

After hearing Gray, Hamal muttered to himself.

“Really? How much longer do we have to wait at Motallan and Pylan? How about the overpass at Elron?”

“Hah? I’m not too sure about Elron. Maybe the bridge there broke?”

“However, if someone was really up to something, I doubt they would let off the overpass there. I was thinking... well, actually, I have a request to make about the meet and greet.”

Gray wanted to suggest that they not gather everyone in the dining hall, but have them wait in the corridor and

come in one by one. That way, it would be much harder for the enemy to remain unseen. It would be easier to deal with them if the situation degenerated into chaos.

Hamal approved of this suggestion.

And so, the meet-and-greet session for the dragon-slaying heroes was conducted in the Reader's Rest.

It was night time, just after the sun had set.

The four boys of the Reader's Rest headed out for a tavern after finishing the day's work, as usual.

It was not because they had been fired, but simply because the inn did not prepare evening meals, so they had to have their dinner at nearby restaurants.

They knew they had made a terrible mistake. This was a wrongdoing they could not atone for.

It was too late to reflect on their sins. They vowed in their hearts that they would never make such a mistake again, but they could not turn back the hands of time. After explaining their crimes and awaiting their expected punishments, they expected the reputation of the Reader's Rest to plummet and for the guests to flee them. The inn might well go out of business.

However, Hamal — the inn's owner — had stepped forward to shoulder the blame. And then Rory, Apostle of Emroy, had absolved that sin with the words, "I forgive you". Ordinarily, the crime of taking swords and stabbing them into beds which they thought might have contained people would be punishable by beheading, but in the end they had been spared the chopping block.

At that time, they did not know if the inn could still survive, but the bad reviews and flight of their guests had not happened. There was none of the castigation and accusations which they had expected. Not even a word of mockery.

They could feel it — this second chance was a sign from Emroy.

They had grown as human beings. They had learned something important as inn workers.

Of course, this was hardly something to be happy about. However, after being freed from overwhelming despair, it was only natural that they wanted to do something about the sign they had been given.

However, a Wild Woman appeared before them.

She was around 17, with an attractive body. Her brown hair was cut short and she had an energetic air about her. Her

eyes sparkled like stars as she looked over to them and her voice was pleasant. She had a direct way of speaking and showed no fear of talking to strangers.

She strode over to them and shouted while pointing with a finger:

“Dum~mies~ the lot of you!”

That first statement defied all words.

The girl, who called herself Nora, continued speaking after making sure that they were from the Reader’s Rest.

“Did you think that after the dragonslayers forgave you, that everything was over? That because you were tricked, you weren’t guilty of anything?”

The boys could not refute her statements.

All they could do was slowly, reluctantly nod their heads.

“We understand that. Therefore, we have resolved not to act rashly in future.”

Their subdued reply drew a cold response from the girl.

“What’s that, you’re being so useless because of that Piper guy? Because you met him this time, you won’t do anything at all? In the end, the outcome will be the same.”

Thanks to the Piper, they had almost done something unthinkable. It was only natural that they would reflect on their sins and not act rashly again. However, that might well be part of his plan as well. Still, they had no choice but to endure with that knowledge burning in their minds. Because of that, the leader of the boys looked at Nora with a troubled expression on his face and asked, “How will it be the same?”

“You moved because you danced to the Piper’s tune. Then, because you don’t want to be fooled again, you won’t do anything. Obviously, what you need to do is not play into his hands. Think for yourself a little. You should take action on your own so you won’t be controlled by him. Simple, isn’t it?”

These words had a great impact on them. It woke them from their hesitation like having an urn of water dumped on them.

They had been deceived by the Piper once, so falling for his tricks again would be unbearable. Then, what could they do? How could they avoid making the same mistakes again?

“Then, what should we do?” the boys asked, looking at Nora for help.

“Catch him with your own two hands. That way you can wipe away the mistake you made in the first place.”

“We don’t even know where he is.”

“There’s no guarantee of that. Your enemy will surely reveal himself at some point, even for just a brief moment.”

“And when is that?”

“Doesn’t the Piper talk people into killing his targets? That means he should probably come by and see if the job was completed.”

“Really?”

The boys were doubtful of the way Nora lectured them with an upright finger. Once bitten, twice shy, after all.

“He’ll definitely come to make sure. You’re boys working at the inn, right? People check to make sure you’ve cleaned properly, right?”

“That... well, yes,, basically.”

The four of them looked at each other. After finishing the tasks their boss gave them, they did not know what happened after that. They should have finished... but they could not be sure that it was complete. The new hires

might not have done a good job, and it might not be up to standards. They had to go in and make sure themselves.

“Right? Assassins work in the same way. The Piper will definitely try to see if you carried out your job. I guess he’ll be going back to the Reader’s Rest to check on things.”

As they heard this, the boys grabbed their heads and wondered what to do next.

“If that’s the case, does that mean we’re going to miss the chance to catch that guy?!”

“That’s why I’m saying you’re idiots.”

The boys grit their teeth as Nora went “idiots, idiots”.

“All right, then tell us why you want to help us. Are you trying to use us?”

“It’s not the same. I’m giving you a chance to catch the bad guy.”

“How so?”

“The truth is, I’m quite mad at the way that Piper guy does things. I’m also wondering what I can do to strike a blow for those heroes. But I heard some news about that Piper guy, so I decided to put myself in his shoes. I’m not the same as you guys, but I noticed some things.”

“Dammit, I hate to admit it, but we’re a step behind you.”

“It’s true, really... Well, if I had to do it, I would attack Lelei-san on the day of her presentation.”

“No way! If you do that....”

“Like I was telling you, the best way to catch that guy is with an act.”

“An act?”

“Yup. Unless we work together closely, we won’t be able to fool his eyes. Therefore, you guys have to talk this over with Lelei-san and the others. My plan is to knock Lelei-san down and then pretend to stab her in the belly, where she will obviously be wearing a bronze plate. The people around me might try to stop me, so I hope you can help run interference for that and keep any people from escaping.”

“Mmhm.”

“If I that happened, that guy would show up to verify if Lelei-san was dead. In that moment, you need to catch this guy. In addition, Lelei-san’s friends are all Dragonslayers. Don’t you think that it would be easy to catch the Piper with their help? And did you guys forget his face?”

“No.”

“Then isn’t it simple?”

“That’s amazing. We’ll definitely be able to catch him that way.”

“Right? How about it? Sounds good, right? Or do you plan to run and hide and return to your normal lives and accept your failures?”

The boys looked at each other and nodded vigorously.

“Got it. We’ll do it.”

Their faces were exactly the same as they had been when they had declared they would take down that group of fraudsters.

In a darkened corner of the tavern, Shandy, who was facing a fortune teller, only saw the beast girl shaking hands with the boys and quietly said,

“That person is no good. No good at all.”

That woman called Nora might be a disguise of the Piper, or one of his puppets.

She would use those boys to make it impossible for anyone to get near their target. The staged murder attempt on

Lelei at the presentation was also a trick. After all, the protective plate could not protect the head or other vital spots.

Rory and Lelei felt that a person who was tricked once would be tricked again.

These four people were too kind and trusted people too easily. Being able to trust people was a virtue of a kind, so this was just taking advantage of their good natures. However, at this moment, Shandy wondered if it would be better to expose this right away.

There were people who would say they were tricked when it was not the case.

“Then we’ll see you again later,” the boys said to Nora as she left.

As Nora left the tavern to head across the street, Shandy watched her from the darkness.

“Itami-sama, he would definitely confirm who had contact with the boys, however...”

As she considered Itami’s instructions, she had a flash of inspiration. Perhaps following Nora meant she could capture whoever was controlling her, and maybe Itami might thank her, and perhaps, somewhere else, he might give her a special prize. Shandy’s imagination spun out of

control, and after hurriedly giving the fortune-teller a few coins, she moved to pursue the woman called Nora.

“Please wait.”

The fortune-teller hurriedly stopped Shandy and said,

“Someone important to you is currently trapped in a difficult situation, and only you can help her.”

The female fortune-teller had picked out the card which showed “The Empress Surrounded by Swords” and explained it to her, but Shandy only cared about chasing Nora and did not pick up on the meaning.

“Ah, thank you, but I’m a little busy right now.”

With that, the woman Shandy exited the building and mounted up on her horse.

And so she vanished, and did not come back the next day either.